

# **Ethical Agency and Actualistic Ontology in the Theological Ethics of Karl Barth**

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## **Signed Declaration**

I, Paul Thomson Nimmo, hereby declare that I have written this thesis and that the work it contains is entirely my own. I furthermore declare that this thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed

Date



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## **Abbreviations**

- I/1 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I, part 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975, 2nd edition)  
I/2 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I, part 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956)  
II/1 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II, part 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957)  
II/2 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II, part 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957)  
III/1 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III, part 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958)  
III/2 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III, part 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960)  
III/3 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III, part 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961)  
III/4 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III, part 4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961)  
IV/1 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956)  
IV/2 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958)  
IV/3 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 3: first half (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961)  
and vol. IV, part 3: second half (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962)  
IV/4 *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969)
- TCL The Christian Life. Church Dogmatics, Volume IV, Part 4. Lecture Fragments*  
(T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1981)
- KD Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 13 vols., (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1932 and thereafter  
Zürich: EVZ, 1938-1965), with individual volume abbreviations as above
- DcL Das christliche Leben. Die Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/4, Fragmente aus dem  
Nachlaß. Vorlesungen 1959-1961* (Zürich: TVZ, 1976)





## **Abstract**

This dissertation investigates the way in which the actualistic ontology which underlies the *Church Dogmatics* of Karl Barth affects his conception of ethical agency. It analyses this effect along three paths of inquiry: noetic, ontic, and telic. The dissertation therefore explores not only the discipline of theological ethics as Barth construes it, but also the ontological import which he attributes to ethical action and its teleological purpose. Along the way, it engages fruitfully with a variety of critiques of Barth's conception of ethical agency, and finds resources within his actualistic ontology to answer some of the varied criticisms.



## §1 Introduction

*It is not as if man first exists and then acts.* - Barth<sup>1</sup>

In 1991, Nigel Biggar wrote that “[T]he English-speaking world has not been generous with the attention it has paid to the ethical thought of Karl Barth.”<sup>2</sup> Over a decade later, it is more than doubtful that the same conclusion could be reached. Since that time, a number of volumes have appeared which have been directly concerned with the theological ethics of Barth,<sup>3</sup> while both general works and edited collections on the theology of Barth now routinely include a chapter on his ethics.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast with much previous scholarship on Barth’s ethics,<sup>5</sup> these more recent works - while seldom devoid of critical engagement - have been broadly receptive to and affirming of Barth’s ethical writing. Much of the impetus for this shift in opinion has been provided by a series of studies which have considered in detail the ontology and corresponding theological anthropology that form the foundations of the theology of Karl Barth.<sup>6</sup> These works demonstrate that while the ontology with

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<sup>1</sup> IV/1, 746.

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 1.

<sup>3</sup> These volumes include David Clough, *Ethics in Crisis: Interpreting Barth's Ethics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005 - forthcoming), Archibald James Spencer, *Clearing a Space for Human Action* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), Joseph Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), Timothy Gorringer, *Karl Barth Against Hegemony* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), and Reinhard Hütter, *Evangelische Ethik als kirchliches Zeugnis* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> The first group includes Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), Joseph Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), Kurt Anders Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), John Webster, *Barth*, second edition (London: Continuum, 2004), Trevor Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), and William Stacy Johnson, *The Mystery of God* (Louisville: WJKP, 1997); the second group includes *Conversing with Barth*, eds. John C. McDowell and Mike Higon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), and *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Roberts, *A Theology on its Way?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), John Macken, *The Autonomy Theme in the 'Church Dogmatics'* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), Robert Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), and, to an extent Biggar himself, in *Hastening*.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Matheny, *Dogmatics and Ethics* (Peter Lang: Frankfurt, 1990), Ingolf Dalferth, “Karl Barth’s Eschatological Realism,” in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. S. W. Sykes (Cambridge: CUP, 1989): 14-45, Wolf Krötke, “Gott und Mensch als ‘Partner’,” in *ZThK*, Beiheft 6 (1986): 158-175, and perhaps most importantly, Eberhard Jüngel, *Barth-Studien* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus

which Barth operates yields a very particular concept of the context of ethical agency, it is a context in which there is nonetheless created a clearly defined space for meaningful human action and human being.

This fresh understanding of the ontological particularity of Barth's theology has led to an ongoing re-evaluation of the importance and validity of his theological ethics. Some of this research has focussed primarily on Barth's early work,<sup>7</sup> while the research on the *Church Dogmatics* has often been selective either in its scope or in its perspective.<sup>8</sup> In recent literature on Karl Barth, however, there has been little attention given to a comprehensive systematic analysis of the relationship between ontology and ethics in respect of the *Church Dogmatics*, an approach which would incorporate both theoretical and practical perspectives.<sup>9</sup>

It is the aim of this thesis to provide this kind of holistic systematic study of the interface between ontology and ethics in the *Church Dogmatics* of Karl Barth. Drawing on the actualistic character of his ontology, this thesis analyses the way in which Barth answers the fundamental issues in theological ethics: by what knowledge, in what manner, and to what purpose an ethical agent acts. Moreover, the thesis shows that these answers cannot be understood adequately without a close regard for the way in which a marked actualistic ontology grounds Barth's understanding of ethical agency at the epistemic, ontic, and noetic levels. Finally, the thesis demonstrates that many of the criticisms directed at Barth's ethics lose their potency when the full implications of this ontology are delineated.

In achieving these tasks, this thesis focuses almost exclusively on the *Church*

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Mohn, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> The vast majority of Spencer's study is concerned with tracing the development in Barth's ethical work prior to the *Church Dogmatics* in *Clearing a Space for Human Action*, while Clough splits his focus between the earlier ethical literature and selected portions of the *Church Dogmatics*, believing that the former offers a heuristic key to the latter, in *Ethics in Crisis: Interpreting Barth's Ethics*.

<sup>8</sup> Mangina approaches Barth's ethics from the practical perspective, and acknowledges that he is selective in his treatment of the subject matter in *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*. Biggar primarily concentrates on the epistemic and noetic aspects of Barth's ethics in *Hastening*. Webster takes up only selected issues or specific periods in the collection of essays in *Barth's Moral Theology*.

<sup>9</sup> The closest model to the work which is attempted here is possibly that of Webster in *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, or that of Willis in his earlier study *Ethics*, in both of which the *Church Dogmatics* is considered as a whole and the focus embraces noetic and ontic concerns.

*Dogmatics*. This is done not only in the interest of rendering the scope of its remit manageable, but also on the pretext that Barth himself desired his theology to be understood on the basis of what he wrote there.<sup>10</sup> This thesis consequently attempts to answer the demand of John Webster for

... detailed study of Barth's writings which, by close reading, tries to display the structure and logic of his concerns without moving prematurely into making judgements or pressing too early the usefulness (or lack of it) of Barth's work for contemporary moral theology.<sup>11</sup>

This study shows that, in the case of the *Church Dogmatics*, the structure and logic of his concerns in theological ethics are closely controlled by his actualistic ontology.

In the remainder of this chapter, the central terms of this thesis - 'ethical agency' and 'actualistic ontology' - are unfolded in turn, before a concise survey of the way to be followed in this particular work is presented.

## **A - ethical agency**

The theme of ethical agency is one of the most dominant in the *Church Dogmatics*. In addition to the explicitly ethical sections of II/2, III/4, IV/4, and *The Christian Life*, it is now recognised that in one sense, as Robert Willis argues, "the *Church Dogmatics* can itself be interpreted as one long, sustained, *ethical* treatise."<sup>12</sup> The imperative *theological* reason for this is clear: while Barth recognises that "the theme of dogmatics is always the Word of God and nothing else,"<sup>13</sup> he nevertheless insists that the theme of the Word of God is "human existence, human life and volition in action."<sup>14</sup> The question of ethical agency is thus at the very heart of the theological

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<sup>10</sup> This view of Barth was communicated to the author by Eberhard Jüngel in private conversation in Tübingen on July 29th, 2003. There is thereby already betrayed the underlying assumption of this work, concurring with the considered opinion of Barth himself, IV/2, xi, that there exists a fundamental continuity to the *Church Dogmatics* from start to finish which more than balances the acknowledged and continual evolution of Barth's theology en route. In matters of ethics and ontology, there exists sufficient continuity between the earlier and later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* to permit this working assumption - especially given the predominance in this thesis of material written by Barth after his shift to a Christocentric doctrine of election in 1936, prior to his writing of II/1.

<sup>11</sup> Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> I/2, 793

<sup>14</sup> I/2, 793.

enterprise for Barth, and constitutes “the great theological problem.”<sup>15</sup> This statement indicates Barth’s fundamental methodological conviction, present from the start of the *Church Dogmatics*, that there can be no separation of theology and ethics.<sup>16</sup> While the discipline of theological ethics is encompassed by that of dogmatics, both are similarly subordinate to and dependent upon the Word of God.<sup>17</sup> Barth concludes that “[D]ogmatics has no option: it has to be ethics as well.”<sup>18</sup>

The inseparability of theology and ethics and revelation indicates that throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth operates with a particular understanding of what Webster calls ‘moral ontology’ - “the objective order of the good and of the ways in which human persons ought to dispose themselves in relation to that order.”<sup>19</sup> For Barth, moral ontology is founded on Jesus Christ, who is “the establishment of the covenant which ... God has instituted and maintains and directs between Himself and His people.”<sup>20</sup> The covenant established in the election of Jesus Christ has two aspects: the divine election of grace, in which God elects Godself to be Lord and Helper of humanity, and the divine command, in which God elects humanity to be the witness of God’s glory.<sup>21</sup> Thus while God acts in grace and love and freedom to establish the covenant, it is simultaneously true that God wills and expects and demands something from the covenant-partner.<sup>22</sup> And so Barth posits that “[A]s election is ultimately the determination of man, the question arises as to the human self-

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<sup>15</sup> I/2, 790.

<sup>16</sup> I/1, xvi. Matheny astutely comments of Barth that “[H]is whole theological effort within the *Church Dogmatics* was directed at liberating dogmatics from its subordination to ethics in order to strengthen the theological claim for Christian ethical responsibility,” *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> I/2, 794.

<sup>18</sup> I/2, 793. Barth posits that “dogmatics loses nothing more nor less than its object, and therefore all meaning, if it is not continually concerned as well with the existence of man and the realities of his situation, if its problem concerning the purity of doctrine and the Word of God in Christian preaching is not also the problem of the Christian life of man,” I/2, 792.

<sup>19</sup> Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 151. Webster notes that talk of moral ontology may suggest a level of abstraction inappropriate to Barth, but explains that “[M]oral ontology’, however, is not an attempt to say that particular moral histories are mere reflections of a transcendent moral reality, but rather an attempt to map out what kind of field moral agents believe themselves to operate in, to answer the question: What *is* moral life and history?,” in *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 156 n.12.

<sup>20</sup> II/2, 8.

<sup>21</sup> II/2, 509-510. Hence Barth states that “the being and essence and activity of God as the Lord of the covenant between Himself and man include a relationship to the being and essence and activity of man,” II/2, 511.

<sup>22</sup> II/2, 11.

determination which corresponds to this determination.”<sup>23</sup>

In accordance with the witness of Scripture, therefore, Barth notes that “[W]e cannot understand the ethical question as the question of human existence as if it were posed in a vacuum ... as if it were not first posed by the grace of God.”<sup>24</sup> Rather, as William Werpehowski correctly observes, for Barth, “[W]e are concretely and currently implicated in a moral universe constituted by the history of God in Christ.”<sup>25</sup> Thus while ethics is the attempt to answer theoretically the question of what may be called good human action, *theological* ethics, as attempted in the *Church Dogmatics*, finds both this question and its answer in the Word of God.<sup>26</sup> Barth’s concept of ethical agency therefore has no other foundation than the revelation of God and no other context than the moral ontology attested by Scripture.

### **B - actualistic ontology**

Thus far in this introduction, there has been much talk of ‘ontology’ and ‘moral ontology’ in connection with the *Church Dogmatics* of Karl Barth. However, it must immediately be cautioned that there is no section in the *Church Dogmatics* wherein Barth explicitly sets out a theological ontology after the manner of a medieval scholastic theologian. As Alan Torrance notes,

[T]he simple reason for this concerns Barth’s commitment to the distinction between *theology* and *ontology* and his refutation of any *universal (pan)* ontology which subsumes both God and humanity within the domain of its principles as theologically and methodologically indefensible.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, it is clear that Barth does write with a particular ontology in view. As Eberhard Jüngel observes,

Barth’s *Dogmatics* makes ontological statements all the way through. But this dogmatics is not an ontology; at least not in the sense of a doctrine of being drawn up on the basis of a general ontological conception within which the being of God ... would be treated in its place. Yet he does not shy away from making ontological statements.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> II/2, 510.

<sup>24</sup> II/2, 518.

<sup>25</sup> William Werpehowski, “Narrative and Ethics in Barth,” in *TT* 43.3 (1986), 342.

<sup>26</sup> *TCL*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 247-248.

<sup>28</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *God’s Being is in Becoming*, tr. John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 76.



It has already been noted that Barth operates with a particular material understanding of the meta-theological context of ethical action, as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. However, it is also true that Barth has a particular formal understanding of this context, namely one in which both the divine agent and human agents are construed in terms of their actions, actions which take place against the backdrop of the covenant of grace and the relationships that covenant calls forth. It is this actualistic ontology which requires further precision.

It is paramount to recognise first that the roots of this actualistic ontology lie for Barth not in metaphysical speculation, but in the revelation of the being of God. Barth writes:

[W]e are in fact interpreting the being of God when we describe it as God's reality, as 'God's being in act,' namely, in the act of His revelation, in which the being of God declares His reality: not only His reality for us - certainly that - but at the same time His own, inner, proper reality, behind which and above which there is no other.<sup>29</sup>

The revelation of God is thus an event in which God acts to reveal God, and in which the possibility of the knowledge of God from the side of the ethical agent is actualised through this gracious act.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, as Jüngel notes, "God's revelation is the criterion of all ontological statements in theology."<sup>31</sup> As, for Barth, not only revelation, but also predestination, creation, reconciliation, vocation, justification, sanctification, and glorification describe divine *action*, he writes that "there is no reason whatever why we should suddenly substitute for this concept [of God] a concept of isolated and static being."<sup>32</sup> For Barth, it is rather the case that "[W]hat is real in God must constantly become real precisely because it is real in God."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Barth writes of God that

<sup>29</sup> II/1, 262. Colin Gunton correspondingly observes that "in his theology, Barth is basing his ontology on his understanding of the Trinity, and ... his language about God follows from his understanding of this *theological* rather than *metaphysical* analogy," *Becoming and Being*, second edition (London: SCM, 2001), 174.

<sup>30</sup> I/1, 224. Trevor Hart posits that "[R]evelation ... is an event: it is something which happens, something which God does, and something in which we are actively involved," in "Revelation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 45. Christoph Schwöbel consequently recognises that if the Self-revelation of God is the sole possibility of knowing God, then natural theology becomes an impossibility, in "Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 32.

<sup>31</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming*, 77.

<sup>32</sup> II/2, 184.

<sup>33</sup> I/1, 427. It should be noted that this view that God's being is in becoming does not for Barth lead in



[T]here is no rigid or static being which is not also act. There is only the being of God as the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit ... . This history in partnership is the life of God before and above all creaturely life.<sup>34</sup>

Hence Hunsinger notes that even apart from creation, “God is alive in the active relations of love and freedom which constitute God’s being in and for itself.”<sup>35</sup> For Barth, accordingly, ‘*actus purus*’ is insufficient to describe God: “[T]o it there must be added at least ‘*et singularis*’.”<sup>36</sup> Barth concludes that “with regard to the being of God, the word ‘event’ or ‘act’ is *final*, and cannot be surpassed or compromised.”<sup>37</sup>

At the heart of the revelation of God is Jesus Christ. For Barth, Jesus Christ is the goodness of God, which is “actualised in the act of God, which is already accessible, revealed and perceptible in the Word of God, and which is impregably grounded in the eternal counsel of God.”<sup>38</sup> In this eternal election, God determines the being of God in eternity to be for humanity in Jesus Christ, a determination which “belongs no less to Him than all that He is in and for Himself.”<sup>39</sup> As Bruce McCormack notes, there is for Barth “no state, no mode of being or existence above and prior to this eternal act of self-determination as substantialistic thinking would lead us to believe.”<sup>40</sup> Barth correspondingly argues that in the life of Jesus Christ it is seen that

... His existence is act; that it is being in spontaneous actualisation. Primarily and supremely we have again to say *actus purus*, the actualisation of being in absolutely sovereign spontaneity, after the manner in which the Creator, God, actualises Himself, so that His life-action is identical with that of God Himself, His history with the divine

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the direction of process theology, for, as a *divine* becoming, it rules out every need of this being for completion and instead confirms its intrinsic perfection, I/1, 427. As Jüngel notes, “God’s self-relatedness must ... be understood as a *becoming proper* to his *own* being,” *God’s Being is in Becoming*, 115. Consequently, Barth’s actualistic construal of God, as McCormack notes, “lies very far indeed from process theology,” in “The Being of Holy Scripture is in Becoming,” in *Evangelicals and Scripture*, eds. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove [IL]: IVP, 2004), 65 n.13.

<sup>34</sup> IV/2, 345.

<sup>35</sup> George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), 30.

<sup>36</sup> II/1, 264. In his discussion of the unity of the doctrines of God and of creation, reconciliation, and redemption, Barth writes that the Word of God “is one in the *actus purissimus* of its actualisation by God, which is identical with the *actus purissimus* of the existence of the Trinity,” I/2, 877-878.

<sup>37</sup> II/1, 263. Barth asserts that “His eternal being of and by Himself has not to be understood as a being which is inactive because of its pure deity, but as a being which is supremely active in a positing of itself which is eternally new,” IV/1, 561. God is not only a being-in-act immanently and transcendently, but is also a God who is and acts and reveals Godself in this world, in time, *TCL*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> IV/3, 799.

<sup>39</sup> II/2, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Bruce McCormack, “The Ontological Presuppositions of Barth’s Doctrine of the Atonement,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, eds. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove [IL]: IVP, 2004), 359.

history. ... [A]s Jesus Christ lives, there takes place in Him both creative actualisation of being, yet also in and with it creaturely actualisation; creative and creaturely life together, without the transformation of the one into the other, the admixture of the one with the other, or separation or division between them.<sup>41</sup>

For Barth, Jesus Christ “is what He is in these actions, in this history.”<sup>42</sup> Willis thus correctly observes that Barth always understands the being of God in Jesus Christ as a being *in act*, thus it is “viewed dynamically, as history, in the birth, life, death, resurrection, and parousia of Jesus Christ.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, McCormack posits, it is only an actualistic ontology that can do justice for Barth to the incarnation of Jesus Christ.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> IV/3, 40. Barth writes that “the being of Jesus Christ, the being-in-unity of the living God and this living man, takes place in the event of the concrete existence of God and of the concrete existence of this man. It is a being, but a being in a history,” IV/1, 126, (translation corrected per *KD*, IV/1, 138). Hunsinger consequently observes that, for Barth, “the person of Christ ... is not conceived statically, but as living in spontaneous self-actualization,” *How to Read Karl Barth*, 239.

<sup>42</sup> III/2, 56. Barth therefore observes that “[W]e have represented the existence of Jesus Christ as His being in His act,” IV/2, 105. This actualistic ontology has clearly been completely misunderstood by Frank M. Hasel, who argues that the dynamic understanding of the incarnation in Barth “tends to eclipse the ontological,” in “The Christological Analogy of Scripture in Karl Barth,” in *TZ* 50.1 (1994), 48.

<sup>43</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 70. Macken similarly notes that “Barth’s ontology reverses the usual metaphysical order by giving priority to the concrete, not, however, in the sense of a pure actualism ... but of the concrete as the event of Revelation in Jesus Christ,” *Autonomy*, 166. Colin Gunton observes that “Barth is sometimes accused of an arbitrary actualism in his understanding of the reality of God, but such an accusation fails to discern the consistent inner dynamic of the trinitarian life. There is freedom, and it is the freedom of the personal reality of God,” in “The triune God and the freedom of the creature,” in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. S. W. Sykes (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 49-50. It is this Trinitarian event of revelation and the history of the covenant which it reveals that might respond to the worries of Heinz Zahrnt in respect of Barth’s “permanent actualism,” in *The Question of God - Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century*, tr. R. A. Wilson (London: Collins, 1969), 29.

<sup>44</sup> Bruce McCormack, “Barth’s grundsätzlicher Chalkedonismus?,” in *ZdTh* 18.2 (2002), 149. McCormack notes that the most common alternative to this ontology would be a substantialistic ontology, in which what a person ‘is’ is something complete in and for herself, apart from and prior to the decisions, acts and relations which make up her lived existence, in “Barth’s grundsätzlicher Chalkedonismus?,” 149. This substantialist ontology would mean, however, that what God does would not be constitutive of what God is, an understanding of God which, in McCormack’s words, “seems to work well enough for all divine activities but one: the incarnation,” in “The Ontological Presuppositions of Barth’s Doctrine of the Atonement,” 357. Therefore, McCormack observes, “[T]he red thread which runs through the whole of Barth’s theology - and gives to his theological ontology its character as relational and actualistic - is the strictly theological problem of the meaning of divine immutability in relation to the fact of the incarnation,” in “The Being of Holy Scripture is in Becoming,” 74.

However, as McCormack himself notes, the actualistic element is evident in Barth as early as the first commentary on Romans, driving his description of the way in which God overcomes the ontological divide between God and creation, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 182. Therefore it seems possible to posit that actualism emerged in Barth’s theology in relation *not* to the problem of immutability and incarnation, but to the problem of otherness and revelation, albeit as focussed on the cross and resurrection. The broader incarnational dimension seems to have been less evident prior to 1924, when Barth adopted an anhypostatic-enhypostatic Christology. Thus the *rote Fade* might start chronologically from revelation and not from Christology, even if theologically the latter is primary, and dominates in the *Church Dogmatics*.

From the programmatic theological construal of God in Jesus Christ as being-in-act there follows for Barth a corresponding anthropological assertion that “true man is characterised by action, by good action, as the true God is also characterised by action, by good action.”<sup>45</sup> The directionality of the ‘as’ here is crucial: the true ethical agent is characterised as a being-in-act only as she is constituted as a being-in-act by God. The correspondence is therefore entirely and unequivocally founded on the divine grace. There is no sense, then, in which the infinite qualitative difference between divine action and human action is in any way abrogated. Barth is clear that

[I]n speaking of the essence of God we are concerned with an act which utterly surpasses the whole of the actuality that we have come to know as act, and compared with which all that we have come to know as act is no act at all, because as act it can be transcended.<sup>46</sup>

In grounding this actualistic ontology in the revelation of Jesus Christ attested in Scripture, Barth thus rejects an abstract or quasi-philosophical act-ontology which might exclude essence on the one hand or history on the other. Jüngel concludes that “Barth fundamentally understands not only the being of God, but also and in the same way the being of the human as a ‘being in act,’ as active being, as action.”<sup>47</sup>

This actualistic ontology which grounds the conception of God is evident from the very first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, where Barth writes that the reconciling action of God “is the *being* of God in Christ, but it is this reconciling *action* that is the being.”<sup>48</sup> Right from the start, it affects not only Barth’s construal of the divine being and the ethical agent, but also his conception of revelation,<sup>49</sup> Scripture,<sup>50</sup> the Church,<sup>51</sup> and dogmatics.<sup>52</sup> As McCormack observes, the actualisation of the doctrine of the atonement brings “in its wake the necessity of affirming the being-in-

<sup>45</sup> III/4, 3.

<sup>46</sup> II/1, 263.

<sup>47</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 202.

<sup>48</sup> I/1, 323.

<sup>49</sup> I/1, 118.

<sup>50</sup> I/1, 110.

<sup>51</sup> I/1, 261.

<sup>52</sup> I/1, 14. It should be noted, however, that this actualistic ontology does not *fully* penetrate Barth’s Christology at this point, as Bruce McCormack argues in “Barths grundsätzlicher Chalkedonismus?,” 145. It is only after the recasting of the doctrine of election after 1936 - and particularly in the work on the incarnation where Barth claims to have “‘actualised’ the doctrine of the incarnation,” IV/2, 105 - that, in McCormack’s words, “the actualism which always governed Barth’s talk of the divine act of relating to the human is now pressed back into the being of God,” in “Barths grundsätzlicher Chalkedonismus?,” 156.

becoming of the Trinity, of human beings and, ultimately, of everything that is.”<sup>53</sup> As Thomas Torrance argues, then,

[T]o understand Barth one must learn how to think with him in his profound integration of ontological and dynamic relations, for that is the way to think in ways appropriate to the unique act of God’s saving revelation in Jesus Christ.<sup>54</sup>

Again, however, it should be noted that to construe these elements of the Christian faith actualistically is to recognise with Herbert Hartwell that they “exist and are real and genuine only if and when and as long as they owe their existence to an act of God.”<sup>55</sup> Hunsinger correspondingly observes that in Barth,

[T]he church, the inspiration of scripture, faith, and all other creaturely realities in their relationship to God are always understood as events. ... They have their being only in act - in the act of God which elicits from the creature the otherwise impossible act of free response.<sup>56</sup>

This emphasis on the grace and activity of God in the ontic foundations of all creaturely reality is a key feature of the actualistic ontology of the *Church Dogmatics*. It means that for Barth, God “is event, act and life in His own way, as distinct from everything that He is not Himself, even though at the same time He is its source, reconciliation and goal.”<sup>57</sup> For Barth, then, the being of God as Being-in-act is not only infinitely qualitatively different from but is also ontologically and theologically prior to the being of the ethical agent as a being-in-act.

## C - outline of work

While many Barth scholars have observed and written about the actualistic ontology which is unfolded in his theology, this work - as noted above - has seldom been

<sup>53</sup> McCormack, “The Being of Holy Scripture is in Becoming,” 64.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), ix-x. As Hunsinger notes, actualism means at the most general level that Barth “thinks primarily in terms of events and relationships rather than monadic or self-contained substances,” *How to Read Karl Barth*, 30, while Ulrich Hedinger similarly observes that “in the whole *Church Dogmatics*, words of happening and of event are preferred over concepts of being and state,” *Der Freiheitsbegriff in der Kirchlichen Dogmatik Karl Barths* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1962), 27.

<sup>55</sup> Herbert Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 33.

<sup>56</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 31. Stuart McLean observes that the way in which Barth uses the traditional words ‘God’, ‘Jesus Christ’, ‘Scripture’, ‘judgement’, ‘freedom’, and ‘love’ cannot be understood “unless one understands that for him *action* and *being* define each other,” *Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 14. Johnson therefore limits Barth’s actualism unnecessarily when he writes that “[T]he ‘actualism’ for which Barth is so famous is nothing less than the action of the Spirit,” *The Mystery of God*, 133.

<sup>57</sup> II/1, 264.

followed through into his theological ethics. Accordingly, this thesis follows this actualistic ontology into the area of ethical agency in three different spheres of engagement - noetic, ontic, and telic.

In the first section, the noetic aspects of ethical agency in the *Church Dogmatics* are examined in the light of the prevailing actualistic ontology. Chapter 2 demonstrates the impact of actualism upon Barth's construal of both the command of God and the doctrine of Scripture, and shows how Barth reaches a careful understanding of the ongoing role of Scripture in ethical enquiry. In Chapter 3, it is posited that Barth's actualism delimits both positively and negatively the discipline of theological ethics, and it is argued that this actualism defends him against the view that his ethics is a form of casuistry. Chapter 4 proceeds to outline how Barth sees the practice of theological ethics in relation to Scripture and the Church, and posits that his actualistic ontology is at the root of understanding and opposing the view that Barth's ethics is too abstract or too removed from the Church.

In the second section, there follows an account of the ontic aspects of ethical agency in the *Church Dogmatics*, again with reference to the actualistic foundations. In Chapter 5, Barth's conception of the ethical agent is viewed in light of his actualistic ontology, and it is seen how, precisely within this ontology, Barth avoids the charge that his theology does not take the ethical agent or her created context seriously. Chapter 6 demonstrates that Barth's construal of the *concursus Dei* - the relationship between divine action and human action - leaves open a definite, if circumscribed, space for genuine human freedom and meaningful ethical agency. In Chapter 7, there is explicated how human action conforms actualistically to the divine action in faith, obedience, and prayer - in limitation but also in reality.

In the third section, Chapter 8 considers the telic aspects of ethical agency in light of Barth's actualistic ontology and demonstrates that Barth's view of participation and witness must be primarily construed in terms of ethical action. The concluding chapter, Chapter 9, briefly illuminates some of the broader ramifications for theological ethics of following Barth's actualistic ontology.



## **Section One -**

### **Noetic Aspects of Ethical Agency**





## §2 The Command of God

*He [God] is not buried in this "once," in the writings of these men. - Barth<sup>1</sup>*

The command of God attested by Scripture is at the heart of Barth's moral ontology and forms the foundation of his theological ethics. Grounded in the doctrine of election, the command of God places before every individual the responsibility of right action in response to the question "[W]hat ought I to do?"<sup>2</sup> Barth consequently construes the task of theological ethics as being to understand the Word of God as the command of God.<sup>3</sup> The actualistic way in which Barth construes the Word of God in respect of both the command of God in general and Scripture in particular has important consequences for both the discipline and the practice of theological ethics. This chapter proceeds in two principal sections. The first investigates the command of God itself, while the second considers how this command relates to the Word of God in Scripture.

### **A - the command of God in outline**

Barth writes that "not merely what we will is under the command of God, but primarily and supremely what we are."<sup>4</sup> The command of God therefore differs from all other commands, encompassing the whole existence of the ethical agent. In what follows, three important aspects of this command will be considered: the command as personal event; the command as good; and the command as Law and Gospel.

#### *i) the command of God as personal event*

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<sup>1</sup> I/2, 683.

<sup>2</sup> II/2, 535. Barth states that "theology has ill understood its task unless it regards this question as one which is not first answered in the Word of God but already grounded in it, the question which in the first instance is put by the Word of God itself," I/2, 793. He contends that it is "as He [God] makes Himself responsible for man that God makes man, too, responsible," II/2, 511.

<sup>3</sup> III/4, 4.

<sup>4</sup> II/2, 659. For Barth, however, "[W]hat it means to have a commanding Lord and Master, and to be pledged to Him, is known only to the man ... who is liberated by the divine change, by his baptism with the Holy Spirit," IV/4, 36.

Barth's theological actualism is seldom more prominent than in his conceptualisation of the divine command and of the knowledge of God. Fundamental to his understanding of the divine command, and thus of theological ethics as a whole, is his view that the command of God is "not in any sense static but active."<sup>5</sup> More specifically, Barth posits that "[A] command is what it is only in the act of the one who gives it and the one who obeys or disobeys it."<sup>6</sup> This statement concisely summarises that the divine command is both an event and personal.

a) the command of God as event

For Barth, the command of God is a very real *event* in the life of the ethical agent. He argues that in the command, "we have to understand a divine action, and therefore an event - not a reality which is, but a reality which occurs."<sup>7</sup> Barth writes that

[T]he concept of the command of God denotes a dynamic reality. ... The command of God is the event in which God commands. It is a specific command of God in each specific form of his dealings with man, in each specific time, in relation to the presuppositions and consequences of each specific existence of each man. ... God in his command ... tells him very concretely what he is to do or not do here and now in these or those particular circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

Hence however the individual may react towards the command, "he cannot possibly evade it as though he were not claimed."<sup>9</sup> Barth writes that God "speaks with us so truly and continuously in His Word, that we are in a position to hear Him with the same truth and exactitude, and obey Him accordingly,"<sup>10</sup> and therefore, for Barth, "[T]he question cannot be whether He [God] speaks, but only whether we hear."<sup>11</sup> Barth comments regarding the witness of Scripture that the individual "is always confronted by the whole and clear and specific command of God; that it is his own

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<sup>5</sup> II/2, 548.

<sup>6</sup> I/1, 272.

<sup>7</sup> II/2, 548. Willis writes that "[P]erhaps the single most important aspect of Barth's discussion of the command is the way in which it is related consistently to the category of event," *Ethics*, 191. Barth notes that "[R]evelation does not encounter man in any general way, as though it were the eternal definition or eternal meaning of all time, or the general solution of the riddle of temporal occurrence," I/2, 209-210.

<sup>8</sup> *TCL*, 33. This sits very uncomfortably with Johnson's view that "[I]t is not as if we could first hear the command and then obey; but we truly hear it only *as* we obey," *The Mystery of God*, 163.

<sup>9</sup> II/2, 631.

<sup>10</sup> II/2, 745.

<sup>11</sup> II/2, 670.

fault if he supposes himself to be in a fog.”<sup>12</sup> Barth concludes that “no matter what attitude we take to it, it is still the case that we are judged by the command of God.”<sup>13</sup>

On the one hand, Barth writes that there is “no divine claim in itself ... only concrete divine claims.”<sup>14</sup> It is the case for Barth that “wherever and whenever God speaks to man its content is a *concretissimum*.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore when the command of God is encountered, Barth states that “man in obedience will always have to do this one thing, while everything else can only be disobedience.”<sup>16</sup> He asserts that

... in the demand and judgement of His command God always confronts us with a specific meaning and intention, with a will which has foreseen everything and each thing in particular, which has not left the smallest thing to chance or to our caprice.<sup>17</sup>

Thus Barth opposes to “the heathen doctrine of the vagueness and uncertainty of the divine command that of its definiteness and concreteness.”<sup>18</sup> Given the changing context in which it is given and heard, the command “can and must be continually repeated and confirmed,”<sup>19</sup> but in each case, it “wills and expects from me something quite specific to the exclusion of all other possibilities.”<sup>20</sup> This specific command “is always at one and the same time the sovereign and definite will of God.”<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, Barth argues that “this specific character [of the command] does not mean that it dissolves itself into a chaos of individual conflicting intimations to individual men in individual situations.”<sup>22</sup> For Barth, one of the perfections of God is the constancy of God - the free decision of God to be the God of love who is active

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<sup>12</sup> II/2, 671.

<sup>13</sup> II/2, 765. For Barth, there is thus “no neutrality in relation to God’s command,” II/2, 610; instead “[W]e either conform to it [the command] or not in what we will and do,” II/2, 632.

<sup>14</sup> II/2, 566.

<sup>15</sup> I/1, 140.

<sup>16</sup> II/2, 704.

<sup>17</sup> II/2, 663.

<sup>18</sup> II/2, 671. This seems to contradict Robin W. Lovin’s view that “[T]he dialectical insistence that God has a unique Word for each situation yields now [in 1929 onwards] to a recognition that the Word can never be understood all at once,” *Christian Faith and Public Choices* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 36. That ‘insistence’ remains just as strong in the *Church Dogmatics* as before.

<sup>19</sup> II/2, 612.

<sup>20</sup> II/2, 669. Barth writes that the command “is quite unambiguous ... [and] itself creates the situation and all the conditions of the situation in which we have to obey,” IV/2, 542.

<sup>21</sup> II/2, 710.

<sup>22</sup> II/2, 711. Barth writes that “the divine will cannot be split up into different commands for the men of different epochs, or nations, or social groups, or spheres of life,” II/2, 712. Its content is always, for Barth, “that their [human] existence is an existence before and with Him, and in conformity with Him, that they must fear Him and love Him,” I/2, 272-273.

and dwells with humanity in Jesus Christ and no other.<sup>23</sup> This constancy of God means, however, that “what has taken place and takes place in Jesus Christ must be understood as a necessary decree of God.”<sup>24</sup> Barth correspondingly argues that “[T]here is no caprice about the freedom of God,”<sup>25</sup> and posits that it is possible to “recognise the divine command in all times and places, nations and spheres of life, by the fact that it is good in the full sense of the term.”<sup>26</sup> This has two implications for the command: first, “in spite of all the diversity of its claims on men it unites them,”<sup>27</sup> and second, “it unifies each individual man in himself.”<sup>28</sup>

#### b) the command of God as personal

The command of God as the Word of God comes to the ethical agent in a profoundly personal way. The Word of God is for Barth “*the truth as it is God’s speaking person, Dei loquentis persona.*”<sup>29</sup> And in terms of this Word of God, “there is no man in general and as such; the Word of God is what it is as it is concretely spoken to this or that specific man.”<sup>30</sup> The command of God therefore has the character of “an act of God which takes place *specialissime*, in this way and not another, to this or that particular man.”<sup>31</sup> Its particular substance for Barth “consists in the fact that it binds the man who hears it ... to the person of Jesus.”<sup>32</sup> Herein, according to Colin Gunton, lies a defence of Barth in response to the charge of ‘Kantianizing’: “[I]t is one thing to obey power exerted absolutely and impersonally, quite another to obey the kind of personal authority with which we have to do in the gospel.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> II/1, 518.

<sup>24</sup> II/1, 518.

<sup>25</sup> II/1, 318.

<sup>26</sup> II/2, 712.

<sup>27</sup> II/2, 716. As good, this command “is not disorderly nor does it operate chaotically, but it establishes and creates fellowship,” II/2, 711.

<sup>28</sup> II/2, 726. The command therefore “requires that man should be in inward harmony, i.e., that he should leave his dispeace below and behind him and therefore be free,” II/2, 728.

<sup>29</sup> I/1, 136.

<sup>30</sup> I/1, 196.

<sup>31</sup> I/1, 159.

<sup>32</sup> II/2, 630. Barth writes that “God’s command, God Himself, gives Himself to be known. And as He does so, He is heard. Man is made responsible. He is brought into that confrontation and fellowship with Jesus Christ,” II/2, 548. Therefore, Barth asserts, “[T]he obedience which the command demands of man is his decision for Jesus Christ,” II/2, 609.

<sup>33</sup> Gunton, “The triune God and the freedom of the creature,” 52. Robert Osborn similarly observes that for Barth, “ethics has not to do with principles of the right and good and their application, but with a personal relationship to a living Lord in a concrete situation,” in “A ‘personalistic’ appraisal of

The command of God is thus a question of the personal responsibility of the ethical agent before God, a responsibility which “refuses to be delegated to man in general.”<sup>34</sup> Barth asserts that

God confronts man in an individual and solitary relationship when He gives him His command and prohibition, and again man stands before God in an individual and solitary relationship when he has to receive this command and prohibition.<sup>35</sup>

Precisely as this personal event, however, the command of God takes place within a definite context: that of the covenant relationship between God and humanity. And so for Barth, it always occurs “in the context and order which are laid down by the fact that he is not a dark and formless numen but the almighty Lord who wills the best for the man who is responsible to him.”<sup>36</sup> While the command of God is a uniquely personal event, it is not an individual event in that it has universal, or more precisely, covenantal validity. Hence for Barth, “the obedience which I owe to the command is measured by the obedience which it claims from us all.”<sup>37</sup> The relationship between God and the ethical agent is thus “an explosive encounter, contradiction and reconciliation, in which it is the part of the divine will to precede and the human to follow, of the former to control and the latter to submit.”<sup>38</sup>

For Barth, the ‘personal’ dimension of the command has three particular consequences. First, the scope of the command is unlimited, in that it not only makes individual demands but also demands that the ethical agent herself, in the totality of her life, be subordinate to Jesus Christ and His Law.<sup>39</sup> Second, the manner of obedience to the command is crucial, for “the decision demanded by God’s

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Barth’s political ethics,” in *SR* 12.3 (1983), 319.

<sup>34</sup> *II/2*, 654.

<sup>35</sup> *II/2*, 710.

<sup>36</sup> *TCL*, 34-35. Barth writes that “[W]e can and should count on it that in all cases, always and everywhere, his free commanding is characterized by his being this and no other God,” *TCL*, 35.

<sup>37</sup> *II/2*, 657. On the one hand, Barth writes of the “overwhelming probability that those who pose the ethical question only in individual terms will try to use this possibility of affirming the exceptional character of their case over against the claim and judgment of the divine command,” *II/2*, 655-656. On the other hand, Barth cautions that the “we of the ethical question is not an unqualified we but the highly qualified we of those who ... are elected in Jesus Christ to be covenant-partners with God and therefore placed under the divine command,” *II/2*, 656.

<sup>38</sup> *II/2*, 644.

<sup>39</sup> *II/2*, 610. Barth writes that “in virtue of its personal character, understood in this way, the divine command demands a genuine decision,” *II/2*, 609.

command cannot be other than a joyous one.”<sup>40</sup> Third, the constancy of the command is guaranteed, for (in the same way as the covenant) it is “the constancy of the divine faithfulness in contrast to our unfaithfulness.”<sup>41</sup> The aim of this ‘personal’ command is finally “the genuine, joyous and sustained decision of man for this person [of Jesus Christ] and therefore ... the fulfilment of the one entire will of God.”<sup>42</sup>

*ii) the command of God as good*

In the event of Jesus Christ, God “actually comes as the Almighty, as goodness in person.”<sup>43</sup> The ethical agent for Barth therefore lives in a context in which “the question of good and evil has been decided and settled once and for all in the decree of God, by the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”<sup>44</sup> Barth consequently asserts that “God and His command are good in the full sense of the term - genuinely and truly good.”<sup>45</sup> In terms of ethical action, Barth is clear that “the Bible knows of no general idea of right human conduct loosed from relation to God,”<sup>46</sup> and thus contrary to any mere idea of the good, “the idea of God’s command is that of the good which is proclaimed to man and required of him, which claims him and judges him.”<sup>47</sup> Barth writes that as “the will of God expressed in His Law is the good which as such requires our active recognition, it is also the criterion of the good or evil nature of our conduct.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> II/2, 611.

<sup>41</sup> II/2, 612.

<sup>42</sup> II/2, 613.

<sup>43</sup> II/2, 560.

<sup>44</sup> II/2, 536. This statement indicates the manner in which Barth transcends the Euthyphro dilemma as to the goodness of God. The election of grace that is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ is an eternal act of decision in which God determines the being of God. As the being and act of God are determined thus, it is the case for Barth that “the idea of God and His command are absolutely and unquestionably prior to the idea of the good,” II/2, 709. Thus ‘good’ is defined primarily not by the will or command of God but in terms of the perfection predicated of God’s very being as the One who loves, II/1, 276. As John Webster notes, then, for Barth [and for Luther], “a Christian theory of the good takes its rise in the doctrine of God,” *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 178. More precisely, William Werpehowski notes that for Barth, the normative criterion for good is identical with the history of Jesus Christ, “Divine Commands and Philosophical Dilemmas,” in *Dialog* 20 (1981), 22.

<sup>45</sup> II/2, 708. Indeed, as noted earlier, the unifying feature of the divine command lies in this goodness: because God and the command of God are good, “the divine will may not be atomised,” II/2, 712.

<sup>46</sup> III/2, 410.

<sup>47</sup> II/2, 666

<sup>48</sup> II/2, 632. There can be for Barth “no question of any other good in addition to this,” II/2, 518, for quite simply, “there is no good which is not obedience to God’s command,” II/2, 541.



The reverse aspect of the goodness of the command of God is that it is not tolerant of sin and disobedience. Barth notes that if the command of God “is not seen and accepted as the ‘law of the Spirit of life’ it must work itself out as the ‘law of sin and death’.”<sup>49</sup> As Robert Willis observes, this reference is to “the Law in its *distorted* form as an independent set of regulations operating outside the framework of the covenant of grace.”<sup>50</sup> This is the aspect of the Law of God demonstrated as it is misunderstood and misused by sin, and as such, for Barth, it not only unmasks the sinful individual as a sinner, but also punishes him as such.<sup>51</sup>

### *iii) the command of God as Law and Gospel*

In Barth’s moral ontology, the command of God “will infallibly make itself known as the law of the gospel.”<sup>52</sup> Barth writes that

[T]he Gospel itself has the form and fashion of the Law. The one Word of God is both Gospel *and* Law. It is not Law by itself and independent of the Gospel. But it is also not Gospel without Law. In its content, it is Gospel; in its form and fashion, it is Law.<sup>53</sup>

For Barth, then, the Word of God is “not only a communication but a challenge, not only an indicative but as such an imperative.”<sup>54</sup> Thus in revealing the Gospel - that is, the work of grace in which humanity is elected and set free - the Word of God also reveals the Law - that is, the divine claiming of that freedom and the subsequent divine judgement of the use made of it. As Barth notes, the Law is therefore “the claim which is addressed to us by the Gospel itself.”<sup>55</sup>

Barth asserts that this conception of the unity of Gospel and Law belongs “to the basic substance of my dogmatics.”<sup>56</sup> As Eberhard Busch observes, it means for Barth that “God and his grace and his law are all declared to us *together*.”<sup>57</sup> There seems to be an intrinsic paradox involved in asserting a unity of Gospel and Law, of

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<sup>49</sup> II/2, 727.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Willis, “The Concept of Responsibility in the Ethics of Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr,” in *SJT* 23 (1970), 286.

<sup>51</sup> II/2, 591.

<sup>52</sup> *TCL*, 35.

<sup>53</sup> II/2, 511.

<sup>54</sup> III/2, 165.

<sup>55</sup> II/2, 557.

<sup>56</sup> IV/3, 370.

<sup>57</sup> Busch, *The Great Passion*, 158.

permission and obligation, and Barth himself acknowledges that “the form of the divine command, in which it demands as permission and is the Law as Gospel, is something which is in principle incomprehensible.”<sup>58</sup> However, for Barth, the truth of this unity is revealed and operative in the work of the Holy Spirit,<sup>59</sup> and the fulfilment of this unity is in Jesus Christ.<sup>60</sup> Therefore it is a unity “revealed and present to us as a promise and only as such, and therefore only in faith.”<sup>61</sup>

The consequence of the unity of Gospel and Law is that for Barth there is no independent doctrine of the Law or of sin. Rather the Law is the Law of the covenant of grace, which “calls man away from any attainment of his own righteousness to repentance and obedience in the form of trust in God’s goodness.”<sup>62</sup> It is only by this Law, interpreted not apart from, but in the Gospel, that “there comes the knowledge of sin.”<sup>63</sup> It is important to note, however, that for Barth, there is no question of collapsing the distinction between Gospel and Law, for the command “remains a Word of judgement even to the obedient, and a Word of promise even to the disobedient.”<sup>64</sup> Rather, as Eberhard Jüngel notes, the primary concern of Barth is not with the differentiation of Gospel and Law - although that clearly has its proper place - but rather with “the right ordering between them: not so much that of the Gospel to the Law, but much more the right ordering of the Law to the Gospel.”<sup>65</sup>

The correct ordering of this relationship is given in Barth’s fundamental claim that the Word of God is “first Gospel and then Law.”<sup>66</sup> This ordering is determined, for

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<sup>58</sup> II/2, 602.

<sup>59</sup> II/2, 603.

<sup>60</sup> II/2, 605.

<sup>61</sup> II/2, 603. As Eberhard Jüngel notes, Barth did not want to leave any room in his theology of the Word of God for an opposition of Gospel and Law within the being of God, *Barth-Studien*, 189. Barth writes, correspondingly, that their unity “is the truth of the grace of God Himself,” II/2, 603.

<sup>62</sup> IV/1, 395.

<sup>63</sup> IV/1, 396.

<sup>64</sup> II/2, 624.

<sup>65</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 187. Michael Beintker notes that this ordering of the Law to the Gospel was already consciously present in the work of Barth as early as 1923, in “Krisis und Gnade: Zur theologischen Deutung der Dialektik beim frühen Barth,” in *EvTh* 46 (1986), 452, but argues that the ordering achieved full Christological precision only after his reconstrual of the doctrine of election in 1936, in “Krisis und Gnade,” 454.

<sup>66</sup> II/2, 511. Jüngel suggests that this reversal of the traditional sequence determines not only the doctrine of God, anthropology, and the doctrine of sin, but that “at the same time it is also decisive for the determination of the relationship between dogmatics and ethics,” *Barth-Studien*, 180. Jüngel notes,



Barth, by the ordering of the perfections of God revealed in Jesus Christ, according to which “the mercy of God must precede His righteousness, just as His grace ... precede[s] His holiness.”<sup>67</sup> Barth is therefore adamant that the history of humanity under the command of God “really begins with the Gospel and not with the Law,”<sup>68</sup> and contends that

[T]he divine claim never stands alone. It is never uttered *in abstracto*, either as that which in some way precedes the occurrence and proclamation of the grace of God, and is therefore primary, or as that which can only follow it, and is therefore secondary. On the contrary, it is always the form, or shape, or garment of grace.<sup>69</sup>

This view has profound implications for Barth’s view of the Law in its aspect under the divine judgement as the law of sin and death. Barth notes concerning the Law that God “makes Himself responsible not only for its authority but also for its fulfilment.”<sup>70</sup> For Barth, then, the Gospel is such that in the completed act of Jesus Christ, God has already accomplished “the great work of faith, so that it no longer needs to be accomplished for us.”<sup>71</sup> Precisely as the Gospel is actualised in Jesus Christ, then, the Law is not only established,<sup>72</sup> but also fulfilled.<sup>73</sup> And precisely as this happens, there is revealed “the replacement and exclusion of the misused and distorted Law which had become a temptation and destruction.”<sup>74</sup> In the place of the law of sin and death, there is now operative the law of the Spirit of life, “the true Law of God, revealed again in its proper substance as Law of grace, and made effective again in spite of its perversion by sin.”<sup>75</sup>

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however, that this reversal reflects a material and not a temporal priority, *Barth-Studien*, 202. It is worth observing that Barth does not consider himself to be entirely without backing from Luther - the paradigmatic proponent of the traditional sequence - on this issue, IV/3, 370-371. Indeed, Christoph Gestrich has argued that when contextual and hermeneutical issues are considered, the teachings of Barth and Luther on this subject are materially compatible, in “Die hermeneutische Differenz zwischen Barth und Luther angesichts der neuzeitlichen Situation,” in *ZThK*, Beiheft 6 (1986), 153.

<sup>67</sup> II/1, 376.

<sup>68</sup> III/4, 54.

<sup>69</sup> II/2, 563. For Barth, this is no less true of the Old Testament Torah than of the apostolic exhortations, of the Ten Commandments than of the Sermon on the Mount, II/2, 563. Indeed, Barth later asks rhetorically, “[C]an we hear the Law before we have heard the Gospel?” III/4, 51. This reflects Barth’s view of the correct relationship between ethics and dogmatics: just as the Law can only follow from the Gospel, so ethics can only follow from dogmatics.

<sup>70</sup> II/2, 543. Indeed, this is a condition of the Law’s validity, that “God orders and only orders on the basis of the fact that He Himself has given and realised and fulfilled what He orders,” II/2, 565.

<sup>71</sup> II/2, 558.

<sup>72</sup> II/2, 562.

<sup>73</sup> II/2, 565.

<sup>74</sup> II/2, 591.

<sup>75</sup> II/2, 592.

There is, however, no room for Christian quietism at this point. Barth argues that in Jesus Christ, “the right action of man has already been performed and *therefore* waits only to be confirmed by our action.”<sup>76</sup> Hence Barth writes that

[I]n the one image of Jesus Christ we have both the Gospel which reconciles us with God and illumines us and consoles us, and the Law which in contradistinction to all the laws which we ourselves find or fabricate really binds and obligates us.<sup>77</sup>

There thus exists a claim on the obedience and action of the ethical agent in the light of the grace of God, for if the covenant between God and humanity has been established in Jesus Christ, “this means that man is jolted and impelled by the aim and goal of a future determined for him.”<sup>78</sup> There arises as a result the outstanding ethical question: “[W]hat does it mean to be a man now that this decision has been reached by the grace of God?”<sup>79</sup>

The fact that the Gospel is always accompanied by the Law provides Barth with the possibility for a radically different construal of what the Law actually is. As John Webster notes, “[S]etting law within the context of election to the covenant, its role is redefined.”<sup>80</sup> In this context, the distinction of Law and Gospel creates theological space for a Christian life which is circumscribed by grace and yet which is called forth to response, and thus the evangelical indicative becomes itself an imperative.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, for Webster, this distinction is “at heart motivated by a desire to register a place for human action in response to God.”<sup>82</sup> Setting the distinction between the Law and the Gospel firmly within the covenant of grace also dispels the possibility that the priority of Gospel over Law could be seen only in *formal* terms. Jüngel notes that if this were so, it would be possible to interpret this priority such that “with the Gospel, God had given the human a new Law, a *nova lex*, [and] that God

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<sup>76</sup> II/2, 543, emphasis added.

<sup>77</sup> II/2, 539.

<sup>78</sup> II/2, 567.

<sup>79</sup> II/2, 558.

<sup>80</sup> Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 111. Webster elaborates that this represents “an understanding of the gospel of grace as not simply the offer of achieved status, but as a summons to internalise a given role and the attendant moral dispositions - in sum, as that which evokes the project of the Christian life,” *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 112.

<sup>81</sup> II/2, 512.

<sup>82</sup> Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 109.

encountered the human originally and enduringly as a Law-Giver.”<sup>83</sup> For Barth, however, the command of God is not an impersonal or acontextual demand along the lines of a new law. The covenant identity of God as the Giver of the command ensures that while the command has the formal aspect of a demand, there remains an unquestionable *material* priority of Gospel over Law.

## **B - the command of God and Scripture**

This part of the chapter investigates the relation between the command of God and Scripture. Barth’s theology at this point is dominated by a highly actualistic understanding of the Word of God in Scripture that has provoked much criticism, particularly among theologians in the Reformed churches.<sup>84</sup> The first section which follows thus briefly considers the doctrine of Scripture in the *Church Dogmatics*. Thereafter, attention turns to the effect this understanding of Scripture has on the discipline of theological ethics. This analysis proceeds in three sections: the first two examine respectively the misuse and the appropriate use of Scripture in theological ethics; and the third reflects on the consequences of Barth’s position.

### *i) the function of Scripture*

For Barth, the key role of Scripture is to witness to the divine revelation.<sup>85</sup> Its witness is to be construed as an act of revelation, for it is “only by revelation that revelation can be spoken in the Bible and that it can be heard as the real substance of the Bible.”<sup>86</sup> Scripture witnesses to the divine revelation in a truth and force which is “a single and simultaneous act of lordship by the triune God.”<sup>87</sup> The power *by* which Scripture witnesses is the same power *to* which it witnesses: the power of the

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<sup>83</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 198-199. Jüngel observes that Barth’s intention has been interpreted this way many times in Lutheran circles, but that this is a “grotesque misunderstanding,” *Barth-Studien*, 199.

<sup>84</sup> For a critical yet measured Reformed response to aspects of Barth’s understanding of Scripture, see John M. Frame, “The Spirit and the Scriptures,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Leicester: IVP, 1986). For a more comprehensive Reformed critique, see Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

<sup>85</sup> I/2, 462.

<sup>86</sup> I/2, 469.

<sup>87</sup> I/2, 539

revelation of the Word of God,<sup>88</sup> and in particular the Holy Spirit who is “the power of the matter of Holy Scripture.”<sup>89</sup> It follows, in the words of Torrance, that “our knowledge of the Bible as the Word of God is itself a divinely grounded event within the two-way relation God sets up between himself and us.”<sup>90</sup>

However, Barth asserts that the Bible itself is not revelation.<sup>91</sup> Barth notes that “[A] witness is not absolutely identical with that to which it witnesses, but sets it before us.”<sup>92</sup> He explicitly recognises that the witness of the Bible is one of “human words written in human speech,”<sup>93</sup> and posits as a result that

... it is quite impossible that there should be an identity between the human word of Holy Scripture and the Word of God, and therefore between the creaturely reality in itself and as such and the reality of God the Creator.<sup>94</sup>

As Torrance notes, to think of the Bible as “an incarnate transcription of the ineffable speech inherent in the eternal being of God ... would presuppose a latent identity between the word of man and the Word of God.”<sup>95</sup> For Barth, there can no more be a divinisation of the human word of the Bible than of the human nature of Jesus Christ Himself.<sup>96</sup> Barth writes therefore that it is simply not the case that “God’s revelation is now before us in any kind of divine revealedness.”<sup>97</sup>

Nevertheless, Barth moves on to affirm that the Bible is not to be distinguished from revelation, “in so far as revelation is the basis, object and content of this word.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> I/2, 459.

<sup>89</sup> I/2, 538.

<sup>90</sup> Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 89.

<sup>91</sup> I/1, 111.

<sup>92</sup> I/2, 463.

<sup>93</sup> I/2, 463.

<sup>94</sup> I/2, 499.

<sup>95</sup> Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 88.

<sup>96</sup> I/2, 681. For Hart, Barth concedes not only the full deity of Scripture, but also the full humanity of Scripture to the point of conceding its sinfulness, a move “which places him decisively beyond the christological analogy,” *Regarding Karl Barth*, 38. Two points are worth noting: first, that this “full deity” of Scripture could only be conceded in a highly actualistic sense, a point Hart recognises in the following section, *Regarding Karl Barth*, 41; and second, that this move beyond Christological analogy also seems to vitiate Hart’s own proposal for a “Nestorian union” between the divinity and the humanity of Scripture, *Regarding Karl Barth*, 35.

<sup>97</sup> I/2, 507.

<sup>98</sup> I/2, 463. In Barth’s scheme of revelation, “[W]e cannot have revelation ‘in itself,’” and therefore in the Church today, “we cannot ... free ourselves from the texts in which its expectation and recollection is attested to us,” I/2, 492. He writes further that “we should not and cannot go beyond the prophets and apostles ... to the pseudo-presence of revelation itself,” I/2, 495.

Barth writes instead that “the relationship between God and Scripture ... can be understood only as a disposing act and decision of God Himself,”<sup>99</sup> and therefore the identification of Scripture with the Word of God is “the event of what God Himself decides and wills and does in divine freedom and superiority and power.”<sup>100</sup> Barth writes actualistically that

... we can only circle round this event; we cannot attain to it of ourselves ... . If it desires and wills to come, taking place within our own encircling exposition - well, it will simply do so, and it will do so the more strongly and gloriously the less we interfere with our clumsy and insolent attempts to attain to it.<sup>101</sup>

The Word of God must therefore be understood such that “its actualisation can only be its own decision and act, that our part in it can consist only in the recollection and expectation of its eternal presence.”<sup>102</sup> Trevor Hart writes succinctly that in this event, as presumably also in its foundation, “God is himself the subject ... as well as the object made known.”<sup>103</sup>

Barth observes that “Holy Scripture is the Word of God to the Church and for the Church,”<sup>104</sup> and that the confession of Scripture as witness to divine revelation thus occurs “in the Church and with the Church.”<sup>105</sup> Among the other factors and motives that are important in and for the life of the Church, Barth asserts that the Church “must hear first, if not exclusively, Holy Scripture.”<sup>106</sup> Consequently, for the Bible to be heard aright, “there is a constant need of that continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and to its members which is always taking place in new acts.”<sup>107</sup> As Torrance notes, “God the Word is *God in action*.”<sup>108</sup> To this end, the Church can only

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<sup>99</sup> I/2, 504.

<sup>100</sup> I/2, 503. The emphasis on the freedom of God in this event is not incidental: thus while Barth can write that the Bible is tied to the Word of God, the reverse statement would “violate the freedom and the sovereignty of God,” I/2, 513.

<sup>101</sup> I/2, 503.

<sup>102</sup> I/2, 525.

<sup>103</sup> Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth*, 45.

<sup>104</sup> I/2, 475.

<sup>105</sup> I/2, 473. For Barth, “Scripture itself is a really truly living, acting and speaking subject which only as such can be truly heard and received by the Church and with the Church,” I/2, 672. George Lindbeck comments that “[W]hen the text thus controls communal reading, Scripture can speak for itself and become the self-interpreting guide for believing communities amid the ever-changing vicissitudes of history,” in “Barth and Textuality,” in *TT* 43.3 (1986), 362.

<sup>106</sup> *TCL*, 193.

<sup>107</sup> I/2, 513. Hence Barth writes that “we have to understand the inspiration of the Bible as a divine decision continually made in the life of the Church and in the life of its members,” I/2, 534-535.

<sup>108</sup> Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 89.

pray that “the Bible may be the Word of God here and now, that there may take place that work of the Holy Spirit, and therefore a free applying of the free grace of God.”<sup>109</sup>

The whole of the *Church Dogmatics* is founded on the premise that this revelation of God through Scripture does take place. Barth argues that “God’s revelation in the human word of Holy Scripture not only wants but can make itself said and heard,”<sup>110</sup> and therefore “[W]e can and should expect this act afresh.”<sup>111</sup> As Francis Watson writes, “[U]nderlying ... the *Church Dogmatics* is a simple, cheerful confidence that God speaks with us in and through the Bible in its testimony to Jesus.”<sup>112</sup> Barth himself writes that the reality and fulfilment of this divine actualisation cannot be doubted.<sup>113</sup> As, then, in the witness of Scripture “the Church itself has to do personally with its Lord,”<sup>114</sup> so for Barth the Church cannot evade Scripture and “try to appeal past it directly to God, to Christ or to the Holy Spirit.”<sup>115</sup> Barth asserts that in this identity of the Word of God with Scripture, the Church is encountered by a miracle,<sup>116</sup> for “here fallible men speak the Word of God in fallible human words.”<sup>117</sup>

*ii) the misuse of Scripture in theological ethics*

Barth is clear that as the Word of God lives, acts and speaks in Scripture, so too it also commands. However, he asserts that this does not involve understanding “the command of God as a prescribed text,”<sup>118</sup> which text would comprise among other elements “biblical texts in which there are believed to be seen universally binding divine ordinances and directions.”<sup>119</sup> Under such a conceptualisation, Barth notes that

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<sup>109</sup> I/2, 514. Barth thus rejects the seventeenth century Reformed doctrines which demanded “a tangible certainty, not one that is given and has constantly to be given again, a human certainty and not a divine, a certainty of work and not solely of faith,” I/2, 524.

<sup>110</sup> I/2, 471.

<sup>111</sup> I/2, 531.

<sup>112</sup> Francis Watson, “The Bible,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 58.

<sup>113</sup> I/2, 514.

<sup>114</sup> I/2, 544.

<sup>115</sup> I/2, 544.

<sup>116</sup> I/2, 528.

<sup>117</sup> I/2, 529.

<sup>118</sup> III/4, 6.

<sup>119</sup> III/4, 6. This ‘prescribed text’ would also be made up of “certain propositions again presumed to be



“God’s command is regarded as in some sense a legal text known to the ethical teacher and those whom he has to instruct,”<sup>120</sup> and the task of theological ethics is to expound the tenets of this text and to apply them to individual cases.<sup>121</sup> Despite its attractions, Barth dismisses this view as ‘casuistry’, and firmly rejects it:

... there is no such thing as a casuistical ethics: no fixation of the divine command in a great or small text of ethical law; no method or technique of applying this text to the plenitude of conditions and possibilities of the activity of all men; no means of deducing good or evil in the particular instance of human conduct from the truth of this text presupposed as a universal rule and equated with the command of God.<sup>122</sup>

This stance has profound implications for the use of the Bible in theological ethics, for if there can be no ‘fixation’ of the divine command in a text, then there can be no ‘fixation’ of the divine command even in Scripture. Barth concludes correspondingly that Christian ethics “cannot adopt as self-evident presuppositions ... any timeless truths supposedly taken from the Bible.”<sup>123</sup>

By contrast, Barth notes that in the unfolding of the covenant of grace as attested by Scripture, God “seems hardly to be interested at all in general and universally valid rules.”<sup>124</sup> He observes that

... precisely in Holy Scripture the command of God does not confront us in the guise of rules, principles, axioms and general moral truths, but purely in the form of concrete historical, unique and singular orders, prohibitions and directions.<sup>125</sup>

In the content of the command of God attested in Scripture, then, it is always a matter of “the ordering of these men to conform in their actions at a definite time, in a definite place and in a definite way to the history of the covenant and salvation controlled by Him.”<sup>126</sup> Consequently, “[N]othing can be made of these commands if

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universally valid, of the natural moral law generally perceptible to human reason, and finally of particular norms which have been handed down historically in the tradition of Western Christianity and which lay claim to universal validity,” III/4, 6.

<sup>120</sup> III/4, 6.

<sup>121</sup> III/4, 6.

<sup>122</sup> III/4, 10.

<sup>123</sup> *TCL*, 4.

<sup>124</sup> II/2, 672.

<sup>125</sup> III/4, 12. In actualistic fashion, Barth demands in respect of Scripture how it can be “a witness of divine revelation, if the actual purpose, act and decision of God in His only-begotten Son ... is dissolved in the Bible into a sum total of truths abstracted from that decision - and these truths are then propounded to us as truths of faith, salvation and revelation?,” I/2, 507.

<sup>126</sup> III/4, 12.

we try to generalise and transform them into universally valid principles."<sup>127</sup> Rather Barth insists that as the command is given concretely in Scripture, "we may infer that it is in this way, concretely, that we ourselves are commanded."<sup>128</sup>

*iii) the use of Scripture in theological ethics*

The rejection of the Bible as a simple ethical textbook leaves open the question of how Barth does view the role of the Bible in theological ethics. Given his stress on the concrete, historical actuality of the command of God, it might be feared that the Bible would be vitiated of all connection with or import for the discipline. Barth does not, however, endorse such a radical conclusion. There are two movements to Barth's argument: first he points to the context of the concrete and particular commands of God in Scripture; and second he insists that in spite of this concreteness and particularity, these commands are nevertheless relevant to the ethical agent today. Each movement will be followed in turn.

a) the context of the divine command in Scripture

As noted above, Barth contends that the divine command in Scripture is always "a concrete command,"<sup>129</sup> "a historical reality,"<sup>130</sup> and therefore that throughout Scripture, characters "always learn by the direct instruction of God or His messengers and servants, of Jesus Himself or the Holy Spirit."<sup>131</sup> However, these commands of God, in all their historical contingency, are not "accidental or meaningless."<sup>132</sup> Rather, Barth insists, they occur within a relationship and a history:

... the whole relationship of God with man in the course of the historical unfolding of His covenant of grace, which forms the true content and object of the biblical witness, is continuously realised in the shape of the divine commanding and prohibiting, the divine ordering and directing.<sup>133</sup>

As a result, Barth suggests that "we may as little think of abstracting from this story

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<sup>127</sup> II/2, 672.

<sup>128</sup> II/2, 671. He therefore concludes that "the command of God is ... not, as understood by post-biblical Judaism and Christianity, a timeless truth in the sense of casuistical ethics," III/4, 12-13.

<sup>129</sup> II/2, 672.

<sup>130</sup> III/4, 12-13.

<sup>131</sup> III/4, 12.

<sup>132</sup> II/2, 676.

<sup>133</sup> II/2, 672.



as from the person of the God who commands.”<sup>134</sup>

Nevertheless, there are passages in Scripture - such as the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount - which seem precisely to offer a more timeless ethical instruction. Barth acknowledges that in such passages, the command

... appears to be addressed to an indeterminate number of men, and ... to be concerned, not with the specific actions of specific men, but generally with certain possibilities of action on the part of all kinds of men.<sup>135</sup>

However, he contends that this appearance is deceptive, and demands that the theme of these texts “be understood historically and concretely and not in a general, non-spatial and non-temporal sense.”<sup>136</sup> When this is done, according to Barth, what confronts the individual in these texts is “collections or summaries of divine commands.”<sup>137</sup> In these collections, there is no sense in which the purpose is

... to compromise or weaken the directness and urgency with which God elsewhere turns to the individual man, to exchange here His personal address for a more generalised word by which the individual may feel himself affected or not ... [or] to blur the definiteness with which God elsewhere requires concrete individual decisions, replacing them by abstract rules or general points of view by means of which the individual has then to decide for himself how he must obey ... [or] to replace and supersede the special events in which God addresses the individual as such and wills to be heard by him.<sup>138</sup>

These passages are thus “not concerned with special commands above and beyond those which God give[s] to His own under the conditions and definiteness of time and space.”<sup>139</sup>

In his exegesis of these particular texts, the key question for Barth is

... whether we have to interpret these special texts in the light of their historical context, or whether, conversely, we have to interpret the historical context in the light of a general ethical understanding of these texts.<sup>140</sup>

He accuses the Church and theology of generally having followed the latter course, and decries this move on account of the fact that “it is capricious to detach these texts

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<sup>134</sup> II/2, 678.

<sup>135</sup> II/2, 681.

<sup>136</sup> II/2, 681.

<sup>137</sup> II/2, 681.

<sup>138</sup> II/2, 681-682.

<sup>139</sup> II/2, 683.

<sup>140</sup> II/2, 680.

from their background.”<sup>141</sup> In the command of God, the ethical agent encounters God face to face, and precisely this lesson cannot be learned from these texts “if we consider them in the usual fashion as separate from these historical pictures and not as integral parts of the one great biblical view of history.”<sup>142</sup> Barth is therefore adamant that “[W]hat ... men are to do or not to do in particular is told them neither in the Ten Commandments nor the Sermon on the Mount nor other biblical texts of this kind.”<sup>143</sup> The question remains, however, as to what the *particular* purpose of these texts is.

Formally, Barth writes that in these texts there is “an extremely energetic apprehension of the individual in his capacity as a member of the people or the Church.”<sup>144</sup> As such, they act to strengthen “the concreteness of the divine command, for everything which God requires from the individual is proclaimed in these summaries as His will for His people or Church.”<sup>145</sup> Indeed, these texts therefore present “a kind of concentrated form - the basic historicity - of the divine command.”<sup>146</sup> At a formal level, then, these passages represent an intensification of the divine command.

Materially, the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount reveal the moral ontology which underlies the encounter between God and the ethical agent, that is,

... the background against which the dealings of God with man are always unconditionally transacted with the urgency and immediacy which characterise them; the presuppositions on both sides; the series of divine attributes and human obligations which will form the framework of the particular events of divine commanding and forbidding, of the actual encounters between God and man, of the events in the history of the divine covenant of grace.<sup>147</sup>

The important lesson of these texts emerges in the knowledge that “[I]n the command of God we are face to face with the person of God, with the action and revelation of this person, with God Himself.”<sup>148</sup> In the texts, God declares that God is

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<sup>141</sup> II/2, 680. Such detachment means for Barth that these texts “cannot be understood,” III/4, 12.

<sup>142</sup> II/2, 676.

<sup>143</sup> III/4, 12.

<sup>144</sup> II/2, 681.

<sup>145</sup> II/2, 682.

<sup>146</sup> II/2, 683.

<sup>147</sup> II/2, 683.

<sup>148</sup> II/2, 676.

the Subject of these commands, and the ethical agent is claimed for the cause of God.<sup>149</sup> There is thereby given

... the delimitation of the sphere in which the life of the divine community will be fulfilled under the control of the Holy Spirit ... [and] the basis, the immovable framework and the objective order within which this life may and will be lived.<sup>150</sup>

The consequence is that these texts do not give “more or other than a framework and programme of the divine action and corresponding human conduct, and therefore of the real history which takes place between God and man.”<sup>151</sup>

In the case of the Ten Commandments, Barth asserts that they “mark off the sphere within which the dealings of God with His people and their conduct before Him and towards Him are to run their course.”<sup>152</sup> Barth writes that “[T]he revelation of the Law as such proclaims who it is that deals with His own in these directions, and who they are that can receive these directions as His own.”<sup>153</sup> In the case of the Sermon on the Mount, Barth posits that “the decisive character of its contents is to be sought in its special connexion with the theme of God’s Kingdom as it has come in the person of Jesus Christ.”<sup>154</sup> Barth declares that it is now Jesus “who defines ...the sphere in which He is present with His own, with those whom He has called and will call, the sphere of His care for them and lordship over them.”<sup>155</sup> For Barth, these two key texts

... are as it were the basic statute of the divine covenant of grace in its Old and New Testament forms, in which it is made known who it is that is Lord and Commander of this history and what it means for men that He is its Lord and Commander. They are as it were programmes or summaries of this history.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> II/2, 682.

<sup>150</sup> II/2, 699. Barth notes that the force of this delimitation, in which the negative far outweighs the positive, is common to both the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, II/2, 688.

<sup>151</sup> II/2, 685-686. It therefore seems quite misleading for Mangina to write of the “universalizability of ethical commands in Barth,” in *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 162 n.33.

<sup>152</sup> II/2, 685. Barth continues that in this way, “[I]t is the foundation statute of the divine covenant of grace and valid for all ages,” II/2, 685. Barth writes similarly that the demand of God that Israel be holy is not a generality, II/2, 572, but rather “has secretly from the very first an objective and universal significance, the significance of the divine claim on all men which it acquires openly with Jesus’ call to follow Him,” II/2, 573-574.

<sup>153</sup> II/2, 686.

<sup>154</sup> II/2, 687.

<sup>155</sup> II/2, 687. This Sermon thus proclaims “the fact that Jesus is both end and beginning, that both are fulfilled in Him, in the reality of the kingdom which has drawn near in Him,” II/2, 687. The picture offered is therefore not of the Christian life, but “of the One who has given these directions and of the light which He Himself sheds on the problems raised, and not only on these, but on man as a whole as he stands face to face with Jesus,” II/2, 688.

<sup>156</sup> III/4, 12. Barth writes of their distinction as follows: “[I]f the Ten Commandments state where man

In both cases, as in other passages in Scripture witnessing to the encounters of God and the individual, these texts show that God and the individual and the individual and God are bound to one another.<sup>157</sup> At the material level also, then, these particular texts represent an intensification of the general level of the divine command.

This construal of these paradigmatic texts impacts how Barth views the calling of the disciples and the resultant traditions connected with the *imitatio Christi*.<sup>158</sup> The command given to the disciples in Scripture to follow Jesus is certainly, for Barth, a question of obedience.<sup>159</sup> However, obedience in following Jesus is not obedience to a general rule or principle, but is rather “a very particular matter - something which comes to each individual in a highly particular way in his own particular time and situation.”<sup>160</sup> There are, for Barth, “specific directions given to specific men at specific times,”<sup>161</sup> and thus “there can be no question of a general rule, a Christian system confronting the world.”<sup>162</sup> Such a system would abstract from the relationship of the Commander to the commanded, and so one could “copy everything that Jesus demanded and that these men did, and yet completely fail to be disciples, because we did not do it, as they did, at His particular call and command to us.”<sup>163</sup> This particular tradition of the *imitatio Christi* is thus dismissed by Barth, as one which “[W]e must not waste time describing and criticising.”<sup>164</sup>

By contrast, Barth argues that what the New Testament stories of the disciples

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may and should stand before and with God, the Sermon on the Mount declares that he has been really placed there by God’s own deed,” II/2, 688.

<sup>157</sup> II/2, 683.

<sup>158</sup> IV/2, 533.

<sup>159</sup> IV/2, 537.

<sup>160</sup> IV/2, 547.

<sup>161</sup> IV/2, 548.

<sup>162</sup> IV/2, 550. In contrast with much Christian ethical tradition, Barth thus contends that “Jesus does not establish what we might call the counter-front of an action which is normative for all His disciples in every age and situation,” IV/2, 547.

<sup>163</sup> IV/2, 553.

<sup>164</sup> IV/2, 533. Biggar concludes that for Barth, “the normative ‘story’ to which human conduct should correspond does not comprise an extract from Jesus’ life or a refrain in it, but a theological summary of it,” *Hastening*, 109. However, Barth himself cautions that “the New Testament certainly did not present Jesus Christ as a moral ideal,” I/2, 156, and therefore Biggar is correct only in so far as, for Barth, this normative ‘story’ continues to be held subordinate to the actual concrete and specific command of God received in the present life of the believer by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, Barth declares that “[T]he formation and direction of a man by the Word of God, which becomes a reality with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, has nothing to do with imitation,” I/2, 276.

... really preserve are certain prominent lines (*gewisse große Linien*) along which the concrete commanding of Jesus, with its demand for concrete obedience, always moved in relation to individuals, characterising it as His commanding in distinction from that of all other lords.<sup>165</sup>

Hence the commanding of Jesus Christ, “while it does not require the same things of everyone, or even of the same man in every time and situation, always moves along one or more of these prominent lines (*jener großen Linien*).”<sup>166</sup> Barth notes in respect of the New Testament witness that “the call to discipleship as it comes to us will always be shaped also by this correlated picture (*durch dieses zusammengehörige Bild geformt*).”<sup>167</sup> On the one hand, in view of this ‘correlated picture’, there is “no reason why He should not ask exactly the same of us as He did of them.”<sup>168</sup> On the other hand, and also with this picture in view, the freedom of God in all its actuality dictates that God “may just as well command something different, possibly much more, or the same thing in a very different application and concretion.”<sup>169</sup> In either case, what is crucial for Barth is the living relationship between the ethical agent and God and her consequent obedience or disobedience to the concrete command of God.

#### b) the relevance of the divine command in Scripture

Having explored the context of the divine command as attested in Scripture, Barth moves to address the relevance of the divine command in Scripture for today, as it encounters the ethical agent across spatial, cultural, and temporal distances. Barth posits that Scripture claims “our realisation that matters are still the same here and now, and that *as* and *what* God commanded and forbade others, He now commands

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<sup>165</sup> IV/2, 547, *KD* IV/2, 619. It is *obedience* that represents for Barth the true *imitatio Christi*, obedience which has nothing to do with the arbitrary self-emptying and self-denial of “a work which man can do to attain his own justification,” IV/1, 629, and everything to do with a faith in humility which “imitates Jesus Christ in whom it believes ... [and] corresponds to Him,” IV/1, 635. Barth correspondingly notes that the formation and direction of the ethical agent by the Word of God (as the work of the Holy Spirit) is better construed in terms of ‘following’ rather than of ‘*imitatio*’, I/2, 277. In view of the range of different theologies of ‘imitation’, it is misleading for Joseph Mangina to write that “[I]n general, Barth displays greater sympathy for the theology of ‘imitation’ than one might expect,” in “The Stranger as Sacrament: Karl Barth and the Ethics of Ecclesial Practice,” in *IJST* 1.3 (1999), 331, emphasis added.

<sup>166</sup> IV/2, 547, *KD* IV/2, 619.

<sup>167</sup> IV/2, 552, *KD* IV/2, 625.

<sup>168</sup> IV/2, 553.

<sup>169</sup> IV/2, 553.

and forbids us.”<sup>170</sup> To understand how Barth construes the relevance of Scripture to the divine command today, it is necessary to investigate what Barth means by this ‘as and what’.

First, Barth is clear that the divine command attested in Scripture has the same form as the divine command which encounters the ethical agent today. He writes that

[T]he real command of God has the same aspect as it bears in the Bible as an event of commanding and forbidding, obeying and disobeying, between the God and man of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>171</sup>

Moreover, the form of the good required in both cases is

... not a general and intrinsic good ... , but the good of the divinely controlled history of the covenant of peace and its subsequent developments, the good of God’s eternal election of grace, the good which bears the name of Jesus Christ.<sup>172</sup>

Thus the action demanded of the ethical agent by God in both cases is always “integrally connected with the establishment and proclamation of His covenant, with His promised kingdom which has now drawn near.”<sup>173</sup>

Second, Barth also confirms a certain material continuity between the divine command in Scripture and the divine command today. He argues that the Bible “tells us, not only that God does demand and how, but also what He demands.”<sup>174</sup> Barth writes that not only all the other ordinances of the Bible but indeed all the other directions that God speaks to individual people concern the contemporary ethical agent directly and not merely indirectly.<sup>175</sup> He asserts that

... they do not concern us only when we have discovered a translation and application of those commands in which they may seem practicable, but absolutely in their historical concreteness and singularity.<sup>176</sup>

The ethical agent must therefore allow “the command given to them [in Scripture] to be again, in our very different time and situation, the command given here and now

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<sup>170</sup> II/2, 701, emphasis added. Barth asserts that “the divine command which can and will be given to us, and heard by us ... cannot either formally or materially differ from that which was given to them and heard by them,” II/2, 706.

<sup>171</sup> II/2, 703.

<sup>172</sup> II/2, 703.

<sup>173</sup> II/2, 703.

<sup>174</sup> II/2, 704.

<sup>175</sup> II/2, 706.

<sup>176</sup> II/2, 706.



to us.”<sup>177</sup> And hence the command of God “has eternal and valid content for us precisely in its temporary expression, and demands that we should hear and respect it in our very different time and situation.”<sup>178</sup>

There is at this point the risk of a grave misunderstanding of Barth. This would involve conceiving the continuity between then and now in terms of a material *identity*, as if the content of the command at a certain point in Scripture were in no way different from the command of God given today. Such a misunderstanding, however, would both subvert the primacy of Gospel over Law, and ignore completely the concrete relationship of the ethical agent with God. In essence, it would entail that which Barth is determined to avoid: the reading of the Bible as a textbook of ethics in abstraction from the history of the covenant of grace.

To understand Barth correctly at this point, it is necessary to recall two actualistic motifs from his understanding of Scripture. First, Barth posits that it is not the Bible itself, *in abstracto*, but the God to whom the Bible bears witness who gives the command.<sup>179</sup> Therefore the material connection between the divine command in Scripture and the divine command today cannot lie in Scripture offering

... a kind of supernatural register or arsenal containing all sorts of counsels, directions and commands, each one of which has an even more supernatural connexion with the life situations of men in the most varied circumstances.<sup>180</sup>

And second, Barth observes that, by the grace of God, “Scripture itself is a really truly living, acting and speaking subject.”<sup>181</sup> It is the current potentiality of Scripture to speak in the present in the power of the Holy Spirit which obviates a simple translocation of the command of Scripture through time.

With these motifs in mind, the material connection between Scripture and the divine command in the present lies in the fact that for Barth, the Bible is “the source and

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<sup>177</sup> II/2, 706.

<sup>178</sup> II/2, 707. Barth notes that “we must dare ... to let the text speak to us as it stands, to let it say all that it has to say in its vocabulary and context, to allow the prophets and apostles to say again here and now to us what they said there and then,” I/2, 533.

<sup>179</sup> II/2, 705. Although Barth cautions clearly that the two - God and the Bible - are not to be separated, II/2, 706.

<sup>180</sup> II/2, 704.

<sup>181</sup> I/2, 672.

norm and judge of all ethical disciplines ... in the historical unity of its content.”<sup>182</sup>

For Barth, this unity of content in Scripture - as a whole and in its parts - attests

... the existence of God as the Lord who rules over us, but who discloses this divine existence in the act of His lordship and work, and His work as that of establishing, maintaining, and confirming the covenant of grace.<sup>183</sup>

Whether the hearer of the command of God is Abraham or Peter or the centurion, Israel or the Church, or even the ethical agent today, the command is given within the context of this unity - “the history and sequel of the covenant of grace.”<sup>184</sup> Thus Torrance is right to note that Barth is careful

... to reject any nominalistic identification of biblical statements with the truth, ... [in favour of] a realist understanding of biblical statements as ontologically grounded in the truth and controlled by it.<sup>185</sup>

And therefore for the ethical agent today, in historical unity with the people of Scripture, the divine command is one which entails “accepting and fulfilling our mission, or partial mission, not as something new and special, but as the renewal and confirmation of the task laid upon them.”<sup>186</sup> This acceptance and fulfilment are not fundamentally about appropriating the words of a historical book verbatim in the quest to secure a textbook of deontological ethics for the present. Rather, the commanding of God found in Scripture has to be understood, for Barth,

... as a call to the awakening to ... freedom, as a direction to make use of that freedom which is given us once and for all in Jesus Christ, and which we can never abandon on any pretext if our action is obedience.<sup>187</sup>

The ethical agent is called to hear afresh the command of God to freedom and obedience through Scripture, as it is given in the power of the Holy Spirit through the historically specific command of God in the narrative of the Bible.

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<sup>182</sup> II/2, 705. In spite of all its multiplicity and contradictoriness, the unity of Scripture is guaranteed, for Barth, by the unity of revelation, I/1, 177. Watson notes correspondingly that “[T]heological interpretation of the Bible presupposes a unity derived from the event on which the whole Bible converges,” in “The Bible,” 63-64.

<sup>183</sup> II/2, 704-705.

<sup>184</sup> II/2, 706.

<sup>185</sup> Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 112.

<sup>186</sup> II/2, 706. This concept of ‘renewal and confirmation’ endorses George Hunsinger in his view that Barth’s “reading of scripture led him to assume a fittingness in the relationship between signifier and signified,” in “Beyond Literalism and Expressivism,” in *MT* 3, 221 n.8. However, it should perhaps be added that Barth nevertheless clearly affirmed the capacity of Scripture to surprise, and that this assumption could not therefore function in abstraction as a fixed hermeneutical rule.

<sup>187</sup> IV/1, 102.



When this is grasped, it becomes clear how Barth can write that “[I]n different times and circumstances it [the command of God] is the same and not the same.”<sup>188</sup> In its working in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God in Scripture “produces the same effect in continually new forms.”<sup>189</sup> Barth explains this unity-in-distinction by noting that

... the individual moments at which ... He [God] encounters individual men in their individual situations are historical moments, i.e., moments in the history of God’s own action, work and revelation, moments in the commencement, continuation and completion of His guidance of the whole history of salvation and of the world.<sup>190</sup>

On the one hand, then, Barth writes that although the ethical agent has to subordinate herself to Scripture, she does so not as she would to God in Godself, but rather “as one subordinates oneself for the sake of God and in His love and fear to the witnesses and messengers which He Himself has constituted and empowered.”<sup>191</sup> And he confesses that

... in view of the notorious non-fulfilment of the Ten Commandments by the people of Israel, it would be sheer folly to interpret the imperatives of the Sermon on the Mount as if we should bestir ourselves to actualise these pictures.<sup>192</sup>

On the other hand, however, Barth states that “these examples are intended to make clear that the grace of Jesus Christ, the grace of the kingdom which has dawned, claims the whole man absolutely.”<sup>193</sup> As such, they “prepare the way for that openness of heart which ... has to be demonstrated and realised in a specific obedience which is always new.”<sup>194</sup> Consequently, “these demands denote modes of conduct which can become possible and necessary even in their literal sense for those who will hear and do the words of Jesus.”<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> II/2, 706. It is simply incorrect, therefore, for Gerald McKenny to argue that “[F]rom the commandments ... one may derive substantive knowledge of the character and standards that the command of God will never violate,” in “Heterogeneity and Ethical Deliberation: Casuistry, Narrative, and Event in the Ethics of Karl Barth,” in *ASCE* 20 (2000), 217.

<sup>189</sup> I/2, 684.

<sup>190</sup> III/4, 14.

<sup>191</sup> I/2, 717.

<sup>192</sup> II/2, 689. Indeed, he comments that the commands that are given in these passages are merely examples, II/2, 696, and observes that the commands of the New Testament “have in the main the form of general direction rather than the particular or highly particularised indication in which we may recognise directly the distinctive operation and commandment of the Holy Spirit,” IV/2, 374.

<sup>193</sup> II/2, 696.

<sup>194</sup> II/2, 700.

<sup>195</sup> II/2, 697. Barth writes that with the above qualifications, “we can see with perfect clarity in the main lines of apostolic admission what is at issue in the instruction of the Holy Spirit,” IV/2, 375. Within his actualistic ontology, Barth can thus assert that Christians are “led and taught and corrected

Barth's actualistic ontology therefore preserves the open possibility of a material identity of the command of God today with Scripture, but does not render it a necessity. This preserves the sense in which, as Biggar notes, "when Barth speaks of the form of Christian life in terms of 'correspondence', he is not exactly speaking of simple conformity to biblical paradigms of right conduct."<sup>196</sup> It is this element of possibility which leaves sufficient and effective freedom to the Word of God to preserve in its command the dimension of continuity and change appropriate to its encounter with the ethical agent in the history of the covenant of grace.<sup>197</sup>

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by the Word of God and therefore by Scripture, that is, by its testimony to Jesus Christ," I/2, 721.

<sup>196</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 105.

<sup>197</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley observes that "the problem still obtrudes that at any given time there may be no coincidence of the living voice of the Spirit and the permanent record of the commands," in "The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Leicester: IVP, 1986), 292. Bruce McCormack similarly notes that "what God has said through the prophets and apostles to the Church in the past may give hints of what he will say through the same to the Church in our own day, but he is not bound to repeat himself," in "Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest," in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective*, ed. Mark S. Burrows and Paul Rorem (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 333. Biggar seems to find this voluntarism on behalf of God potentially problematic, arguing that it could lead to "something quite extraordinary, even nonsensical," *Hastening*, 119. It could be argued, however, that Biggar's penchant for seeking and finding fixed moral principles in Barth's ethics hints rather at an unnecessary will to systematisation which Barth stubbornly resists and that it undervalues Barth's profound appreciation of the constancy of God. It could also be argued that the contradictions that Biggar is protesting would be seen by Barth to be at the noetic rather than the ontic level. This point is made by George Hunsinger, who notes that for Barth, a theology true to its subject matter will be unable to avoid making statements which appear to be contradictory, but these contradictions "are merely apparent, because their status is basically noetic rather than ontic," in "A Response to William Werpehowski," in *TT* 43.3 (1986), 355. That is, they pertain to the state of human perception rather than to an actual state of affairs, and thus point to "the limits of our capacity for understanding, not to an objectively irrational actuality," in "A Response to William Werpehowski," 355. For Barth, after all, it is God Godself who is "as such the source of all true logical consistency," II/1, 426. In this way, Barth contends that "the man who obediently hears the command of God is not in any position to consider why he must obey it," II/2, 522. Hunsinger later notes that "[T]he central reason for Barth's readiness to tolerate discrepancies in logic and in perception ... is simply his loyalty to the word of the text ... which takes startling precedence even over the law of noncontradiction and the assessments of rational observation," in "A Response to William Werpehowski," 359. It is to be wondered, therefore, whether William Werpehowski is right in his optimism that although they can never be definitely anticipated before the fact, "particular hearings of the divine command can be understood after the fact," in "Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth," in *JRE* 9 (1981), 310. Matheny comments that for Barth, "theology is fundamentally liberated from logical consequentialism and therefore not subject to arguments based on human intuition," in *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 23 n.28. Matheny correctly attributes this to Barth's insight that "Christian discourse is always and in every situation new," *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 23 n.28, that is, to his actualism. Certainly Barth himself writes in respect of the Gospel that "it is generally intelligible and explicable ... [and] its content is rational and not irrational," IV/3, 849, but he also insists that "the whole content of the Gospel in all its elements and dimensions should be allowed to be its own principle of explanation," IV/3, 849. As Matheny later notes, "[I]f there is logical inconsistency in Barth's use of concepts, it has less to do with the way the categories are utilized than with the unfathomable character of the object of theological description to which no category or combination thereof is adequate," *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 68. Finally, Bromiley

*iv) reflections on the use of Scripture in theological ethics*

Two features of Barth's use of Scripture in theological ethics are worthy of further reflection. The first concerns his holistic approach to Scripture, while the second pertains to the personal dimension of the command of God in Scripture.

a) a holistic approach to Scripture

One aspect of Barth's theology which emerges strongly in his discussion of the use of Scripture in ethics is its holistic dimension. Foundational for this dimension is Barth's belief that "both as a continuous whole and in its individual parts the Bible attests the existence of God as the Lord who rules over us."<sup>198</sup> Given this historical unity of content, Barth argues in respect of the paradigmatic biblical passages on ethics that

... it is surely arbitrary to seek the biblical witness to God's command, and therefore what might be called biblical ethics, only or even primarily in these contexts. What God's command is, and what it means even in these contexts, is rather to be derived from the greater whole to which they belong. Thus it is certainly not the case that, according to the Bible, God commands only or even primarily where these universally valid rules are thought to be discovered.<sup>199</sup>

This holistic approach to Scripture bears theological fruit in three related ways.

First, it offers concrete acknowledgement of the canonical unity of Scripture. Barth certainly recognises the clear distinction between the Old and the New Testament, between "the witness of the expectation and the recollection, the witness of the preparation and the accomplishment of the revelation achieved in Jesus Christ."<sup>200</sup> However, he insists that "[W]e cannot separate ... the Old and New Testaments as a whole, without at each point emptying and destroying both."<sup>201</sup> Second, and

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himself acknowledges that "[A] problem of human caprice remains, for readers may always reject the divine direction, or pretend not to have heard it, or to have heard something else," in "The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth," 294. However, he notes that "this is a problem in all ethics; even those who see in Scripture a set of given commands disagree widely on what the commands are or how to fulfill them," in "The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth," 294.

<sup>198</sup> II/2, 704-705.

<sup>199</sup> II/2, 672.

<sup>200</sup> I/2, 481.

<sup>201</sup> I/2, 482.

consequently, this approach vitiates the unsatisfactory tendency in theological-ethical debate to degenerate into a trading of proof-texts. Barth insists that over and above the obvious places in Scripture upon which biblical ethics usually focuses, “the whole remaining content of the Bible is replete with ethics.”<sup>202</sup> The God attested not only in Scripture as a whole, but also in each and every portion, is the same God whose command it is the task of theological ethics to reflect upon and hear and obey. As Watson notes, this requires a careful reading of Scripture as a whole and on its terms, under “the assumption that *all* scriptural texts are to be read with the same loving attention and patient expectation.”<sup>203</sup> Finally, this approach retains even within the context of theological ethics the important truth that while the Law is indeed the form of the Gospel, the Gospel is the primary message of Scripture. As the history of the covenant of grace is its essential theme and content,<sup>204</sup> Barth asserts that “the theme of the Bible is something other than the proclamation of ethical principles.”<sup>205</sup>

b) the personal command of Scripture

A second aspect of Barth’s theology which is brought out at this point is the personal dimension of the actualistic command of God. Barth writes that Scripture “bears witness, not to an alien and dead, but to our own living Lord and Commander and Judge.”<sup>206</sup> There is therefore no such thing as a command of God in the abstract, but only a command of God as part of a concrete relationship with an individual in the covenant of grace. For this reason, Barth writes that “[O]bedience to God always means that we become and are continually obedient to Jesus.”<sup>207</sup> For this reason, Biggar seems to miss the point when he writes of Barth’s ethics that

... it would have enhanced the coherence of Barth’s own account had he spoken of rules which are absolute in the sense of always holding in all appropriate cases; and had he acknowledged that such a concept of rules is quite compatible with an understanding of ethics as both rational and open.<sup>208</sup>

It may well have enhanced the human coherence of Barth’s account, as well as

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<sup>202</sup> II/2, 672.

<sup>203</sup> Watson, “The Bible,” 65.

<sup>204</sup> II/2, 678.

<sup>205</sup> II/2, 680.

<sup>206</sup> II/2, 671.

<sup>207</sup> II/2, 568.

<sup>208</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 120.

making theological ethics a much easier discipline to consider and debate. However, a nexus of absolute rules - even absolute rules open to change - can surely be nothing other than an abstraction from personal relationship and encounter. As Hart notes, such an “open system of known principles and laws ... would seem in effect to be a two-dimensional way of expressing a three-dimensional truth.”<sup>209</sup> That crucial third dimension, so important to Barth, is one of history, relationship, and encounter.

Barth stresses that this relational aspect of the command of God is attested in both Old and New Testaments. In his consideration of the Ten Commandments, he notes that in the life of Israel, there is “no abstract cult-regulation, no abstract legal norm, no abstract moral law.”<sup>210</sup> Instead, obeying the commandments means to take up the position they indicate, and in this position “to wait for the specific commands of God for which the proclamation of the Law prepares us, to be constantly obedient to His call.”<sup>211</sup> And therefore, Barth notes that for Israel,

[E]verything that God wills is an exact expression of the fact that those of whom He wills it are His own ... . The Ten Commandments and the various ceremonial, legal and moral enactments, are not independent and cannot be separated from this antecedent.<sup>212</sup>

Meanwhile, in his treatment of the questioning of the rich young man in the Gospels, Barth similarly asserts that the command of God has two aspects: “an external and an internal side, a *μορφή* and a *τέλος*.”<sup>213</sup> Obedience to the external command is clearly a necessary part of obedience to God, but it is not enough on its own. Such obedience represents “allowing the command of God to determine his action but not himself, not subjecting himself to it.”<sup>214</sup> With such an attitude, the individual

... respects and measures himself by a law, the reference and concern of which is only for what he does and does not do, and not for himself in what he does and does not do. This law is not the Law of God, the living Law established and confronting him in the person of Jesus ... .<sup>215</sup>

As Scripture attests these historical and particular examples of the command of God and their distinct relational dimension, so Scripture in theological ethics has to

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<sup>209</sup> Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth*, 86.

<sup>210</sup> II/2, 572.

<sup>211</sup> II/2, 686.

<sup>212</sup> II/2, 572.

<sup>213</sup> II/2, 615.

<sup>214</sup> II/2, 617.

<sup>215</sup> II/2, 618.



indicate “the place where this direction is given and is audible and effective.”<sup>216</sup> In this sense, Biggar is right to note that Barth sees “the Bible’s main contribution to Christian ethics in its revelation of theological reality rather than in any direct revelation of morality.”<sup>217</sup> In this way, Scripture can attest the actualistic nature of the command and thereby be “a witness to God’s special commanding here and now.”<sup>218</sup>

### C - summary

The construals of the command of God and of Scripture which Barth brings to theological ethics are highly actualistic. First, Barth’s doctrine of the command of God testifies to a dynamic and personal God who exists in an ongoing relation with His people and calls each person to individual responsibility. Barth writes that “we were and are and will be responsible to the command as it is given us in this way - really *given*, and given integrally, concretely filled out, and with a definite and specific content.”<sup>219</sup> Only in obedience to the command will the ethical agent correspond to her election in Jesus Christ. And second, the ethical witness of Scripture is not for Barth “a rigid prescription inscribed, as it were, on a stone tablet, which the Church and its members have to read off mechanically.”<sup>220</sup> Rather, as Bartholomew notes, it is the case that “an approach to Scripture yields a theological reality, which integrally shapes a theological ethics.”<sup>221</sup> That is, the function of Scripture in theological ethics is to delineate the moral ontology in which the ethical agent exists. The following two chapters will explore how these actualistic construals impact the discipline and the actual practice of theological ethics.

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<sup>216</sup> III/4, 12.

<sup>217</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 111. Werpehowski notes more opaquely that “[T]heological ethics is grounded in biblical ethics which, in turn, has as its grounding principle the understanding of the narrative shape and unity of the whole of the biblical witness,” in “Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth,” 305. Werpehowski himself has subsequently acknowledged the risk that such language may focus on narrative interpretation to the detriment of full recognition of the realism of Barth’s theology, and has therefore reaffirmed his acknowledgement of Barth’s ontological priorities, in “Hearing the Divine Command,” 64-65.

<sup>218</sup> III/4, 13.

<sup>219</sup> II/2, 664.

<sup>220</sup> I/2, 672.

<sup>221</sup> Craig Bartholomew, “Introduction,” in *A Royal Priesthood? - The Use of the Bible Politically and Ethically - A Dialogue with Oliver O’Donovan*, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Jonathan Chaplin, Robert Song, and Al Wolters (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 16.

### **§3 The Discipline of Theological Ethics**

*... we do not know any free investigation of good and evil. - Barth<sup>1</sup>*

This chapter and the following chapter turn from the command of God and its relation to Scripture to consider the theory and practice of reflecting upon that command. This chapter examines the discipline of theological ethics, while the following chapter investigate its performance.<sup>2</sup> For Barth, the discipline of theological ethics is located firmly within dogmatics, for the ethical agent “exists only in the course of the existence of the holy God and of the study of His speech and action.”<sup>3</sup> In the first section below, there is an analysis of that construal of the discipline of ethics which Barth deems theologically inappropriate. In the second section, there follows a consideration of the discipline of theological ethics as Barth construes it in light of his actualistic ontology. In the third and final section, there is an effort to assess the difficulties involved in Barth’s polemic rejection of casuistry.

#### **A - inappropriate theological ethics**

The discipline of theological ethics, as Barth construes it, is severely circumscribed. On the one hand, the creatureliness and sinfulness of the ethical agent render many conceptualisations of the discipline inappropriate. On the other hand, the very nature of the command of God seems to leaves the discipline itself open to question.

##### *i) theological ethics and the limitations of the ethical agent*

The discipline of theological ethics is limited first by the creatureliness of the ethical agent. Barth writes that there is a corresponding ontological limitation, for her

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<sup>1</sup> II/2, 535.

<sup>2</sup> It should be stressed that this division is, to paraphrase Barth’s own caveat on I/2, 795, merely technical in character and not based on principle and method.

<sup>3</sup> I/2, 790. Barth’s treatment of the discipline of ethics is split between general ethics, whose task is “to show ... the fact and extent that the command of God is an event,” II/2, 548, and special ethics, whose task is “to show in detail to what extent this divine command is actually directed to man,” II/2, 549.

existence as human and her need of God “are not two things but one and the same thing.”<sup>4</sup> This unavoidable dependency of the creature on her Creator is in turn reflected in theological ethics, for Barth observes that Scripture “knows of no rational activity, knowledge, philosophy or the like which is loosed from the perception of God and yet intrinsically good.”<sup>5</sup> The discipline of theological ethics is limited second by the sinfulness of the ethical agent. Barth writes that there is a corresponding epistemological limitation, for she does “not know any free investigation of good and evil.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, it is the command of God and not the ethical agent that is the true judge of good and evil.<sup>7</sup> As a result of these two limitations, the ethical agent is without any inherent ethical knowledge and her investigation of the ethical question is perverted by sin from the start.

With these limitations of creatureliness and sinfulness in mind, Barth argues that “[W]hat begins with the human self cannot end with the knowledge of God and His command.”<sup>8</sup> This view has three immediate consequences for the form of theological ethics. First, it means that for Barth, theological ethics will not “make the disastrous, traitorous use of ‘natural’ theology, which is the only use that can be made of it.”<sup>9</sup> Second, it means that any attempt to orientate theological ethics apologetically to general human ethics “is false ... [and] must be completely abandoned.”<sup>10</sup> And third, it means that any dualistic differentiation of theological ethics and general human ethics is “forbidden.”<sup>11</sup> In order to avoid these “gross blunders of apologetics and

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<sup>4</sup> III/2, 411-412.

<sup>5</sup> III/2, 403. Barth notes correspondingly that the Bible “constantly undermines the autarchy of a general human reason loosed from God as its origin and object, and protests against the banishment of the perception of God into a religious corner,” II/2, 596.

<sup>6</sup> II/2, 535.

<sup>7</sup> II/2, 596. Indeed, for Barth the faculty of the knowledge and judgement of good and evil is one of the radical and defining differences between Creator and creature, III/1, 259-260. It is the very desire to distinguish between good and evil that leads the ethical agent to sin, II/2, 586.

<sup>8</sup> II/2, 541.

<sup>9</sup> II/2, 523. Barth states that theological ethics “will not accredit or adjudge to him [the individual] a moral enquiry and reply which are actually independent of God’s command,” II/2, 523.

<sup>10</sup> II/2, 524. Barth argues that “theological ethics on its part will cease to be what it is ... if it dares to submit to a general principle, to let itself be measured by it and adjusted to it,” II/2, 521. Barth asks rhetorically, “Is God’s revelation revelation of the truth ... ? Outside and alongside the kingdom of Jesus Christ are there other respectable kingdoms?” II/2, 526.

<sup>11</sup> II/2, 527. Barth notes that theological ethics “has to take up the legitimate problems and concerns and motives and assertions of every other ethics as such,” II/2, 527, and thus that “Christian ethics cannot limit its validity to Christians only, i.e., to those who are aware that their life is essentially and objectively a life in responsibility,” II/2, 643.



isolationism,”<sup>12</sup> theological ethics must limit itself to bear witness to the true and revealed foundation of all things, the decree of God.<sup>13</sup>

*ii) theological ethics and the nature of the command of God*

The discipline of theological ethics is further restricted by the nature of the command of God. The command, as outlined in the previous chapter, is concrete, specific, and personal, and always occurs in an event of revelation rather than having a static or codifiable historical existence. The ramifications of this actualistic construal for theological ethics are far-reaching. First, given that Barth believes that the goodness of human action is determined exclusively by the divine command,<sup>14</sup> any general investigation of ethics without recourse to the divine command “coincides exactly with the conception of sin.”<sup>15</sup> Second, given that the command of God is a specific prescription and norm in every case,<sup>16</sup> Barth writes that “[A]s long as we ... think we can solve the ethical problem by concerning ourselves with human conduct in general, all ethics is ghostly, insubstantial.”<sup>17</sup> Third, the discipline of theological ethics cannot proceed by way of abstraction or innovation, because “[W]hat we are commanded is never something that we can merely wish to know.”<sup>18</sup> Finally, given that the command of God is rooted in the relationship of the individual with Jesus Christ,<sup>19</sup> Barth stresses that “what we have to investigate is his participation in the righteousness of this Subject and not his own abstract immanent righteousness.”<sup>20</sup>

**B - appropriate theological ethics**

Given the above restrictions, Barth may seem to have left little scope for a viable discipline of theological ethics. Such a suspicion is strengthened by his conviction

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<sup>12</sup> II/2, 534.

<sup>13</sup> II/2, 536.

<sup>14</sup> II/2, 547.

<sup>15</sup> II/2, 518. Willis comments that on this actualistic basis, “[T]he emergence of a *formally* complete ethic is ruled out,” *Ethics*, 172.

<sup>16</sup> II/2, 663.

<sup>17</sup> II/2, 653. Barth explains that “[I]t is a question of responsibility. And responsibility refuses to be delegated to man in general,” II/2, 654.

<sup>18</sup> II/2, 658.

<sup>19</sup> II/2, 539.

<sup>20</sup> II/2, 540.

that the ethical question, implicitly posed in the divine election of humanity in Jesus Christ, has in fact already been answered by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> Barth writes that “[P]rimarily and properly, what God wills with man and to have from man is not decided and executed and revealed in us, but in Jesus Christ.”<sup>22</sup>

However, it is for exactly this reason that the ethical question retains its relevance. Barth posits that:

... we should cleave to the salvation accomplished and prepared for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and therefore to His sanctity, so that we for our part may ask in all earnestness: What ought we to do?<sup>23</sup>

For this reason, Barth writes that in theological ethics, “the atonement made in Jesus Christ cannot simply be a presupposition which has been left far behind.”<sup>24</sup> Instead, theological ethics is a question of the participation of the ethical agent in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and therefore the extent to which her action glorifies the grace of Jesus Christ.<sup>25</sup> Ethical action will therefore be good “in so far as it is sanctified by the Word of God which as such is also the command of God.”<sup>26</sup> Correspondingly, Barth notes that “[T]he task of theological ethics is to understand the Word of God as the command of God.”<sup>27</sup> Given his actualistic understanding of

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<sup>21</sup> II/2, 517. Barth writes simply that “[T]he man Jesus ... is the answer to the ethical question put by God’s grace,” II/2, 516, and later notes that the command of God is already established and fulfilled and revealed “in grace - the grace of God in Jesus Christ,” II/2, 539.

<sup>22</sup> II/2, 738. For Barth, the name of Jesus Christ “represents and includes our name, His person our person, both in what He suffers and in what He does, in what He undergoes both as condemnation and as justification,” II/2, 758.

<sup>23</sup> II/2, 645.

<sup>24</sup> IV/1, 101.

<sup>25</sup> II/2, 540.

<sup>26</sup> III/4, 4.

<sup>27</sup> III/4, 4. Such a statement unequivocally circumscribes the valid limits of the discipline of theological ethics in a more stringent way than Johnson seems willing to accept, *The Mystery of God*, 64, 162 and 173, where Johnson cites passages from Barth to the effect that theological ethics must be open to the content of general human ethical enquiry and reply, II/2, 524, and to the problems and concerns and motives of every other ethics, II/2, 527 and 535. Johnson fails to emphasise that in both cases, Barth carefully limits the nature or validity of this ‘openness’ in terms of the distinctive and non-negotiable origin and basis of theological ethics in the command of God. For this same reason, it seems misleading for David Haddorff to contend that “[T]he openness of Barth’s ethics ... extends to his willingness to include *non-theological* sources of insight in the formulation of Christian ethics,” in “The postmodern realism of Barth’s ethics,” in *SJT* 57.3 (2004), 281, emphasis added. The word ‘non-ecclesiastical’ seems better suited to Haddorff’s argument here. For Barth, “the command of God is not founded on any other command, and cannot therefore be derived from any other, or measured by any other, or have its validity tested by any other,” II/2, 522. It is thus more accurate to write, as Matheny does, that “[T]he value of non-theological perspectives, as of all other perspectives, is seen, understood, and judged only from the theological perspective of revelation with its reference to

the command of God, Barth acknowledges that ethics can only proceed in the framework of “the event of God’s concrete command and man’s concrete obedience or disobedience.”<sup>28</sup> As only the command of God is unequivocally good, theological ethics can only proceed deductively, in “an investigation of its explanation (self-explanation) and conformation (self-confirmation).”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Barth asserts, the command of God “does not need any interpretation, for even to the smallest details it is self-interpreting.”<sup>30</sup> Consequently, Barth notes, it “cannot, either in advance or subsequently, decide what God wills from man ... [or] itself give direction.”<sup>31</sup>

Thus far, Barth’s definition remains at the level of form and not of content. At this point, Nigel Biggar poses a highly pertinent question: “if my normative ethical reflection has no necessary or dependable connexion with what God will or will not command, then why should I bother with it at all?”<sup>32</sup> In an attempt to overcome this seeming aporia, Barth introduces the concept of the ‘formed’ reference to the command of God. Upon this concept Barth founds his entire special ethics and through this concept Barth introduces the element of necessity and dependability which Biggar’s question seeks. In what follows the concept of the ‘formed’ reference is investigated more fully in four parts: first, the concept is introduced; second, the relationship between this concept and Scripture is considered; third, the relationship between this concept and the concept of ‘orders of creation’ is explored; and fourth, the potential of a theological ethics based on the ‘formed’ reference is assessed.

#### *i) the ‘formed’ reference*

The significant move which Barth makes to allow the discipline of theological ethics to achieve greater material specification is to posit that alongside the vertical dimension of the command of God as a unique, concrete, particular event, there exists a corresponding horizontal dimension. As the command of God encounters the

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eschatological reality,” *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 225.

<sup>28</sup> III/4, 15-16.

<sup>29</sup> II/2, 518.

<sup>30</sup> II/2, 665.

<sup>31</sup> *TCL*, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Nigel Biggar, “Hearing God’s Command,” in *Reckoning with Barth*, ed. Nigel Biggar (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988), 114.

ethical agent vertically in all its varied particularity, it does so horizontally as part of a history of encounter in the covenant of grace. And thus each individual encounter in this history is always part of something larger: “the history of God’s own action, work and revelation,”<sup>33</sup> or, from the opposite perspective, the history at the heart of which there is always “the action of the same subject, of man, this man.”<sup>34</sup> In this history, God is Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer, while the ethical agent is correspondingly “His creature, the one who is accepted in grace and has a part in His promise.”<sup>35</sup> Without compromising the unity of God or of the ethical agent, or indeed of the ethical encounter, there are therefore “definite spheres and relationships ... in which this encounter takes place.”<sup>36</sup>

This, then, is the horizontal dimension of the ethical event, which encapsulates “the constancy and continuity both of the divine command and human action.”<sup>37</sup> This dimension recognises that the ethical event “takes place in the history of God with this man but also with all other men.”<sup>38</sup> Barth argues that if anything can be known about this horizontal dimension, there arises the possibility of a non-casuistic special ethics which would allow for a “reference to the event, which will ... be articulated, colourful and contoured (*artikulierten, farbigen, konturierten Hinweis*).”<sup>39</sup> This reference would offer what he describes as a “‘formed’ reference (*geformter Hinweis*)” to the vertical dimension of the ethical event in the light of its horizontal dimension.<sup>40</sup> And, Barth believes, it is precisely the task of special ethics “to make this reference to the ethical event as a reference formed in this sense.”<sup>41</sup>

The question remains, however, as to the possibility of knowing about this horizontal

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<sup>33</sup> III/4, 16.

<sup>34</sup> III/4, 17.

<sup>35</sup> III/4, 28.

<sup>36</sup> III/4, 29. Barth stresses that “in the ethical event God commands and man acts in all three spheres at once,” III/4, 33, thereby clearly fixing the number and content of these ‘spheres’. It is thus incorrect for Lovin to assert that these ‘spheres’ are “social institutions ... [which] include worship, the family, the life of the body, and work in one’s calling,” *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 118.

<sup>37</sup> III/4, 17.

<sup>38</sup> *TCL*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> III/4, 17, *KD* III/4, 18.

<sup>40</sup> III/4, 18, *KD* III/4, 18.

<sup>41</sup> III/4, 18. For Barth, then, if theological ethics “cannot be a legalistic and casuistic ethics, not can it be an obscure ethics of the *kairos* in general,” *TCL*, 5. Indeed, the very task of theological ethics is “to expound *this kairos* - that of the event between God and man,” *TCL*, 5.

dimension of the ethical event. Barth immediately answers in the affirmative: “[W]ho the commanding God is and who responsible man is ... is not hidden from us but is revealed and may be known in the one Jesus Christ.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore the focal point of the history of encounter between God and humanity, and consequently the starting-point for all consideration of the ‘formed’ reference to the ethical event and the special ethics which stems thence, is the history of Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup> With the revelation of God and humanity in that history,

... reference to the event - the many events - of the encounter between the commanding God and the man who acts can and must become a formed and contoured reference (*zum geformten, zum konturierten Hinweis*), yet nothing more than a reference, which at least approximates to the concretion of that event.<sup>44</sup>

With this ‘formed’ reference, Barth argues that special ethics is given a material principle (*Materialprinzip*) such that

[I]t knows not only the point of this event (*den Punkt dieses Ereignisses*) but also the field (*das Feld*) in which it takes place, to which it looks as it knows about the event as such, and from which it then looks back upon the event with a concrete perception of what is involved.<sup>45</sup>

It is with reference to this field, this order, this moral ontology, that Barth asserts that “[C]oncrete human action thus proceeds under a divine order which persists in all the differentiations of individual cases.”<sup>46</sup> Hence for Barth, “[I]n every case there will be a continuity, a positive relationship, between what God has caused man to be and become as Creator and Lord and what He will now have of him.”<sup>47</sup> As such, the ‘formed’ reference may “help man on to ethical reflection and action, to the finding, studying, honouring, and, God willing, the keeping of the commandments.”<sup>48</sup>

## ii) the ‘formed’ reference and Scripture

For Barth, information about this ‘formed’ reference to the horizontal dimension of

<sup>42</sup> TCL, 5. It is in Jesus Christ that “the fact of the encounter of God and man is not merely a fact which can be recognised as such, but also a Word ... which can be known as such,” III/4, 24.

<sup>43</sup> III/4, 26. James M. Gustafson thus risks a grave misunderstanding when he argues that “Barth can write about the *need* for a ‘formed reference’,” in *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective: Volume Two - Ethics and Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 30. The ‘formed’ reference is not needed from the side of ethical reflection but is rather given from the side of divine grace.

<sup>44</sup> TCL, 6, DcL, 6.

<sup>45</sup> III/4, 27, KD III/4, 28.

<sup>46</sup> III/4, 17.

<sup>47</sup> III/4, 596.

<sup>48</sup> TCL, 7.



the ethical event is revealed exclusively by the Word of God. He writes that “[W]e have reliable and legitimate information about this horizontal [dimension to the ethical event] either by God’s Word or not at all.”<sup>49</sup> It is Scripture which provides the ‘formed’ reference to the ethical event, for it is Scripture which reveals

... the basis and sphere of the kingdom in which God confronts man either to command or to forbid, as self-determinations of God who does this and the determination of man who experiences the divine encounter, as indications of the relationship in which God utters His definite Yes or No to man’s action, as ordinances with which a man must be familiar in order to be able to hear, and actually to hear, the decrees of God which concern his actual life.<sup>50</sup>

Within Scripture, the ‘formed’ reference is seen to be constant in that, for Barth, “it is always the same divine Overlord who ... confronts various men, and ... in these men it is always a question of the people of His choice.”<sup>51</sup> From this ‘formed’ reference, then, Barth posits that “there result certain directives that can serve as witnesses to the Word of God as the divine command which God alone speaks to man.”<sup>52</sup> Special ethics is founded on this concept on this ‘formed’ reference to the ethical event, a concept attested by the Word of God in Scripture.

*iii) the ‘formed’ reference and the ‘orders of creation’*

Given that one of the spheres of the ‘formed’ reference is the sphere of creation, the question arises as to the relationship between that sphere of the ‘formed’ reference and the theological concept of ‘orders of creation’. While, on the one hand, Barth affirms the use of the concept of the ‘formed’ reference in theological ethics, on the other hand, he severely criticises the view that there exist an “order or many orders of creation, which create a sort of basis, sphere or framework for the real divine commanding to be extracted from God’s particular revelation.”<sup>53</sup>

Barth offers three important grounds of criticism for rejecting the concept of ‘orders

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<sup>49</sup> III/4, 19.

<sup>50</sup> II/2, 700.

<sup>51</sup> III/4, 12.

<sup>52</sup> *TCL*, 7. Werpehowski rightly notes that “Barth’s theory of the spheres both makes possible and demands a description of God’s activity which is liable in principle to extensive specification. ... Barth is committed to making his descriptions of the ethical situations ever more concrete through specification and further specification of the spheres of God’s activity,” in “Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth,” 309.

<sup>53</sup> III/4, 36.



of creation'. The first ground is that the concept is ethically unsatisfactory - it implies that ethical certainty can be attained through the 'orders of creation' even in abstraction from the revealed Word of God.<sup>54</sup> The second ground is that the concept is theologically unsatisfactory - it suggests that these 'orders' are separate from the command of God the Redeemer, and thereby threatens the unity of both the command and the concept of God.<sup>55</sup> The third ground is that the concept is epistemologically unsatisfactory - it infers that the 'orders of creation' are divorced from the true Creator-creature relationship, from faith and from revelation.<sup>56</sup> For Barth, then, while God commands and the ethical agent responds within the sphere of creation, the sphere of creation in itself is not a law "according to which God commands and man does right or wrong."<sup>57</sup>

This negative view on the 'orders of creation' may initially seem at odds with the view which Barth earlier expressed in his lectures on ethics, at which point he endorsed a concept of 'orders of creation'. At that time, he wrote that these orders

... come directly into question ... with the fact of our life itself as representatives of *the* order, as a creaturely standard and basis of knowledge of the will of the Creator, as words which we cannot possibly overlook in obedience to *the* Word because they are set on our lips and in our hearts with our life as direct testimonies to *the* Word.<sup>58</sup>

However, a closer analysis confirms that the 'orders of creation' posited in these lectures are not affected by the three criticisms of the concept in the *Church Dogmatics*. In respect of the first criticism - the assumption of ethical certainty - already in *Ethics*, Barth posits that even if the ethical agent had perfect knowledge of all the orders, "we still could not speak any final word about what is good or bad, since *the* order is not coincident with the totality of the orders."<sup>59</sup> In respect of the second criticism - the division in the divine command - Barth notes already in *Ethics* that it is "inadvisable ... to construct an antithesis between the command of the Creator and the command of Christ,"<sup>60</sup> and declares that "[W]hat the Creator really

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<sup>54</sup> III/4, 37.

<sup>55</sup> III/4, 37.

<sup>56</sup> III/4, 38.

<sup>57</sup> III/4, 29-30.

<sup>58</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethics*, ed. Dietrich Braun, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 215, hereafter *Ethics*. The lectures were given in 1928-1929 in Münster and in 1930-1931 in Bonn.

<sup>59</sup> *Ethics*, 214.

<sup>60</sup> *Ethics*, 118-119.

commands is not a 'natural' but a Christian command, and what is really a Christian command is an order of creation."<sup>61</sup> Finally, in respect of the third criticism - the abstraction from divine encounter - already in *Ethics*, Barth affirms that "no general moral truth, no matter where it comes from, must intervene between him and us,"<sup>62</sup> and that the claim of the command of God is one of right, "for we belong to him who commands from the very first."<sup>63</sup> It is thus clear that on each count, the concept of 'orders of creation' which Barth advocates in *Ethics* not only escapes the criticism of the concept that appears in the *Church Dogmatics*,<sup>64</sup> but positively anticipates the latter's actualistic and relational concept of the command of God.<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, there exist important differences in how Barth treats the issues of an ethics of creation between *Ethics* and the *Church Dogmatics*. There are two key differences: one terminological and one methodological.

First, Barth is explicitly more cautious in the *Church Dogmatics* in his use of the term 'order', for fear that it might suggest the accessibility of universal ethical truths in abstraction from divine revelation and encounter.<sup>66</sup> Barth writes that the spheres of creation, reconciliation, and redemption, within which the ethical encounter takes place, might very well be called orders.<sup>67</sup> However, he acknowledges that in doing

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<sup>61</sup> *Ethics*, 119.

<sup>62</sup> *Ethics*, 119.

<sup>63</sup> *Ethics*, 118.

<sup>64</sup> The criticism of the concept of 'orders of creation' that is found in the *Church Dogmatics* is aimed not at Barth's own earlier construal of the concept, but at the construal of Emil Brunner, III/4, 19-23 and 36-37. For Brunner, the 'orders of creation' are "concrete instructions to work, given by the Creator God to the individual human being," *The Divine Imperative*, tr. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth, 1937), 337. Brunner further argues that the work of God "as Creator and Preserver of the world differs from His work as Redeemer," *The Divine Imperative*, 220. Finally, Brunner suggests that the 'orders of creation' are the subject of a purely rational knowledge, *The Divine Imperative*, 220, something in which "[E]ven a man who does not know God perceives ... something of the Will of God," *The Divine Imperative*, 221. On each point, Brunner falls foul of Barth's three-fold criticism of the concept of 'orders of creation'.

<sup>65</sup> John W. Hart is right to observe that "[W]hile Barth endorses the concept of the orders of creation in these lectures [*Ethics*], his urge to qualify immediately what he affirms indicates his unease with the concept," *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 117. Indeed, so passionate was Barth's later reaction against the concept of 'orders of creation' that he prevented the publication of *Ethics* within his own lifetime. The reason for this strong reaction undoubtedly lies in the abuse of the concept of 'orders of creation' which Barth witnessed at the hands of the 'Deutsche Christen' in their support of National Socialist ideology in inter-war Germany: see Biggar, *Hastening*, 55.

<sup>66</sup> III/4, 30.

<sup>67</sup> III/4, 29.



so, “there would always be the possibility of misunderstanding them as laws, prescriptions and imperatives,”<sup>68</sup> and emphasises that “[T]he distinction between this order and what is customarily called ‘order of creation’ elsewhere is clear and irreconcilable.”<sup>69</sup> Consequently, the terms *an* ‘order of creation’ and *the* ‘orders of creation’ are generally eschewed in the *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>70</sup>

Second, the theology of Barth in the later work is grounded far more explicitly in Christology, not only in theory but *also* in practice: not only noetically but also ontically.<sup>71</sup> In terms of ethics, this signifies the need to interpret the command of God in each of its three spheres in a more definitely Christocentric manner. Reflecting on his ethics of creation in the *Church Dogmatics*, for example, Barth writes:

... we were not being arbitrary when ... we did all we could to provide a christological and soteriological foundation for all the relevant discussions. What can the Christian say that is true and important about the encounter between God the Creator and man his creature in its ethical character if he does not receive light from the point where this encounter may be seen as an event in the covenant of grace set up between God and man, and therefore in its primal form?<sup>72</sup>

The four lines along which the ethics of creation are unfolded in the *Church Dogmatics* - the individual as the creature of God, as the covenant-partner of God, as soul and body, and as a being in her own time - are therefore derived from this

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<sup>68</sup> III/4, 29.

<sup>69</sup> III/4, 45. The term ‘the order of creation’ and its cognates is nonetheless found with this distinct meaning in the *Church Dogmatics*, for example, at III/3, 39, III/4, 52, and III/4, 53, as well as at *KD* III/1, 141, which reference is lost in translation. Moreover, the parallel term ‘the order of reconciliation’ and its cognates is also used, for example, at I/2, 157, III/3, 6, and IV/3, 743. Finally, Barth refers to these two ‘orders’ together at IV/1, 229 and IV/3, 43. While no references to ‘the order of redemption’ exist in the *Church Dogmatics*, such a reference would be materially consistent.

<sup>70</sup> Thus Barth rejects the view that either marriage or the state or racial segregation is an ‘order of creation’ - see III/4, 141, 148, 200 and 201; III/4, 303, 304, 305, 311, 312, and 317; and IV/3, 899 respectively. However, Barth does occasionally lapse into the vocabulary of ‘orders of creation’: first, he refers to the relationship of man and woman as an ‘order of creation’ at III/4, 205, 301, and 305; and second, he refers to the relationship of parents and children as an ‘order of creation’ at III/4, 301 and 305. Nigel Biggar is right to see such examples as a rare exception, “Barth’s trinitarian ethic,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 226. However, despite these clear formal lapses in vocabulary, the *material* and *context* of these ‘exceptions’ suggests that Barth’s thinking even at these points evidences precisely the revelational, Christocentric, and relational view of the ethics of creation that is affirmed elsewhere in the *Church Dogmatics*.

<sup>71</sup> McCormack posits that Barth’s development of Christology was not fully complete until the revision of the doctrine of election in 1936, at which point Barth’s theology finally became “a Christologically grounded, christocentric theology,” *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 328.

<sup>72</sup> *TCL*, 12.

primal noetic and ontic form, the revelation of Jesus Christ attested in Scripture.<sup>73</sup> This unfolding takes place in Barth under the theological presupposition that “we are invited to infer from His human nature the character of our own, to know ourselves in Him, but in Him really to know *ourselves*.”<sup>74</sup> Thus these four lines are not categories read from reality or from the creation *per se* or even from the creation as belonging to Christ.<sup>75</sup> Instead, they are lines of the constitution and relationality of human being as determined exclusively in the person of Jesus Christ revealed in the Word of God.<sup>76</sup> This Christological concentration is clearly in evidence when Barth outlines the legitimate use of the term ‘order of creation’ to describe

... the particular sphere of divine command and human action in which on the one side the God who is gracious to man in Jesus Christ commands also as Creator, and on the other the man to whom God is gracious in Jesus Christ stands before Him also as His creature.<sup>77</sup>

Thus while Biggar is right to note that in Barth, the “exposition of the command of God the Creator is based upon the created relational structure of the human creature,”<sup>78</sup> it is the relational structure of the human creature as *revealed and known in Jesus Christ*. It is this structure of created human life, part of the divine ‘order of creation’ - the sphere of the command of God the Creator - which contributes to the ‘formed’ reference which underlies each and every ethical encounter.

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<sup>73</sup> III/4, 43-44, anticipating III/4, §53-56, and based on III/2, §44-47.

<sup>74</sup> III/4, 54.

<sup>75</sup> It is here that the critical difference between Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the ethics of creation emerges. In his work on ethics, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6 - Ethics*, tr. Richard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), Bonhoeffer shares with Barth an understanding of the will of God as Christocentric and revealed, *Ethics*, 74 and 390, but proposes a number of ‘mandates’ in which the “relation of the world to Christ becomes concrete,” *Ethics*, 68. For Bonhoeffer, these ‘mandates’ are divine “only because of their original and final relation to Christ,” *Ethics*, 69, and they have the character of “the divinely imposed task as opposed to that of a determination of being (*der Charakter des göttlichen Auftrages gegenüber dem einer Seinsbestimmung*),” *Ethics*, 69, translation altered. However, for Barth, such ‘mandates’ risk being arbitrary in that they are not truly Christologically grounded and centred: by contrast, as noted above, the aspects of the divine order of creation which Barth sketches out amount *precisely* to a determination of the being of the ethical agent in Jesus Christ. Moreover, for Barth, these ‘mandates’ risk in all their static givenness becoming themselves imperativ in force: by contrast, Barth insists at every point on preserving the dynamic actualism of the ethical event, III/4, 22.

<sup>76</sup> It is therefore quite mischievous of Biggar to declare these four dimensions to be “orders of creation ... albeit incognito,” *Hastening*, 58, a view which Gorringe accepts without question, *Karl Barth Against Hegemony*, 208 n.191. To label them thus not only obscures their epistemological origin but also endangers a true understanding of Barth’s methodology.

<sup>77</sup> III/4, 45.

<sup>78</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 58.

iv) the potential of the 'formed' reference

For Barth, the discipline of theological ethics as it is based upon the 'formed' reference has a distinct goal. He writes that in every case, special ethics "has in mind the *mandatum Dei concretissimum* in the ethical event; it is a guide to its understanding."<sup>79</sup> To answer the question of how this understanding is to emerge, Barth writes that with the help of the 'formed' reference,

... it is possible and even imperative to trace the historical outline always peculiar to the ethical event, to give an indicatory if not a complete picture of it piece by piece, to gain at least a prospect of the field or fields of the encounter of God and man, and then from this standpoint to put the counter-question what is the command of God and the corresponding right human action in this or that sphere and relationship and as reflected in this particular mirror.<sup>80</sup>

In this way, special ethics can lead "in the direction of the answer which is finally asked of each of us,"<sup>81</sup> and the ethical question can gain a "sharpness in which the question almost acquires the character of an answer."<sup>82</sup> As a result, through the 'formed' reference, the discipline of special ethics can offer first encouragement,<sup>83</sup> and second instructional preparation for the ethical event.<sup>84</sup> Barth correspondingly suggests that theological ethics both can and should

... aid the proper human hearing of God's command, and therefore true human obedience to it, in the form of a series of questions which arise from the nature of the case, and which we must all answer, but in answering which we must all be clear what is always involved in the proper hearing of this command and true obedience to it.<sup>85</sup>

Consequently, Barth writes that "as we consider what God Himself commands of each one of us, we cannot be wholly in the dark, nor must we lack definite and indeed very urgent instruction."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> III/4, 48.

<sup>80</sup> III/4, 30. With the 'formed' reference, then, theological ethics can "point to the event of the encounter between God and man, to the mystery of the specific divine ordering, directing, and commanding and of the specific human obeying or disobeying," *TCL*, 34. In the light of this statement, it seems bizarre for Willis to contend that "[T]he spheres and relationships created by the command of God, and the general direction set for human behavior within them, must be distinguished," *Ethics*, 425. It is not the general direction, but the *specific* direction for human behaviour under the command of God which may require this distinction in the exceptional case.

<sup>81</sup> III/4, 30.

<sup>82</sup> III/4, 31.

<sup>83</sup> III/4, 16.

<sup>84</sup> III/4, 18.

<sup>85</sup> III/4, 66.

<sup>86</sup> III/4, 72. The 'formed' reference thus prevents Barth's theological ethics embodying a pure form of act-deontology, as both Werpehowski and Biggar note in opposition to Lovin and Willis: see

In spite of its obvious power, the last word in respect of the power of the ‘formed’ reference must be one of caution. It is clear to Barth that the ‘formed’ reference itself cannot provide either an anticipatory judgement on the ethical action,<sup>87</sup> or an answer to the ethical question,<sup>88</sup> nor will it of itself be able to define or determine the ethical event.<sup>89</sup> And thus while the ethical event takes place within the spheres of creation and reconciliation and redemption, “neither the command of God nor the obedience or disobedience of man coincides with these spheres and relationships in which they take place, and therefore cannot simply be read off from them.”<sup>90</sup> While the ethical agent is called “to ask what God wills of us, what is the command of God here and now by which we are to direct our life and conduct,”<sup>91</sup> for Barth it is ultimately the Holy Spirit “who actually reveals and makes known and imparts and writes on our heart and conscience the will of God.”<sup>92</sup> The actualism of the command of God will therefore always limit the power of the ‘formed’ reference.

### C - theological ethics and casuistry

The way in which Barth understands and conceptualises the discipline of theological ethics has been widely criticised, particularly in respect of the question of casuistry and the consequent role of human reasoning. Barth writes that any attempt at what he calls ‘casuistical ethics’ is a perilous undertaking in which “the moralist wishes to set himself on God’s throne.”<sup>93</sup> Barth presents a threefold case against the acceptability of casuistry: first, it represents the ethical agent’s wish to set herself on God’s throne

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Werpehowski, “Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth,” 317 n.5; Biggar, *Hastening*, 21 n.73; cf. Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 27-28; Willis, *Ethics*, 157 n.2.

<sup>87</sup> III/4, 18.

<sup>88</sup> III/4, 30.

<sup>89</sup> III/4, 30.

<sup>90</sup> III/4, 29.

<sup>91</sup> IV/2, 372.

<sup>92</sup> IV/2, 372. Against this background, it is quite bizarre to find Biggar assert that “[T]hat the Spirit’s call is to fulfil the structure of creaturely being clearly implies that, contrary to its popular reputation, Barth’s ethics does in fact espouse what could reasonably be called a version of natural law,” *Hastening*, 164. This would only hold in any meaningful sense if Barth expanded his sources of ethical reflection, as Biggar desires, from the Word of God alone to embrace both the Christian tradition and the basic reasons for human action, such as knowledge of the truth and aesthetic experience, *Hastening*, 165.

<sup>93</sup> III/4, 10.

in distinguishing between good and evil;<sup>94</sup> second, it renders the command of God “a universal rule, an empty form, or rather a tissue of such rules and forms;”<sup>95</sup> and third, it encroaches upon Christian freedom in its truest sense, that of obedience and self-offering to God.<sup>96</sup> It is clear, therefore, that Barth’s actualistic ontology precludes his accepting a deductive scholastic casuistry based on fixed and determinate principles.

However, there remains a question of the extent to which the concept of the ‘formed’ reference to the ethical event might leave open the possibility of a broader form of casuistry in Barth’s own theological ethics. In an important contribution to this question, Nigel Biggar posits that Barth’s special ethics is systematic, but not a closed system,<sup>97</sup> for it leaves open the possibility that the command of God could make an extraordinary demand of the ethical agent that would lead her ethical reflection to “be faced with a case that is simply unintelligible; and whose effect, therefore, upon the process of moral reasoning is not to correct it, but to suspend it.”<sup>98</sup> Biggar acknowledges that Barth interprets many of these exceptional cases as unexpected meanings of the normal case,<sup>99</sup> and suggests that such cases baffle human moral reasoning into learning “in order that the ethical system might yet extend or refine its grasp.”<sup>100</sup> In this way, Biggar argues, Barth is “proposing an ethical system that is open to correction and so to development,”<sup>101</sup> and thus advancing a dialectical kind of casuistry that constantly involves “the modification of old rules and the generation of new ones in the attempt to give faithful expression to a given moral principle in reaction to new, morally significant data.”<sup>102</sup> Biggar concludes that without this (unacknowledged) form of casuistry, Barth would lack a key requisite

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<sup>94</sup> III/4, 10.

<sup>95</sup> III/4, 11.

<sup>96</sup> III/4, 13.

<sup>97</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 31.

<sup>98</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 33. In a remarkable aside, Biggar compares Barth at this point to Joseph Fletcher, a staunch advocate of situation ethics, *Hastening*, 33 n.108. In contrast, as Stanley Hauerwas perceives, the seriousness with which Barth treats human sinfulness gives his work “far more substance than the facile optimism of situation ethics,” *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1985), 177. At issue for Barth at this point is not human discernment of the loving thing to do, which is obviated for Barth by human sin, but obedient attention to the command of God.

<sup>99</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 33.

<sup>100</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 34.

<sup>101</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 36.

<sup>102</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 41. Mangina agrees with Biggar that “Barth engages in something very much like casuistry himself,” *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness*, 151.



“for an explicit and coherent account of the relationship between systematic ethical deliberation about right action and the hearing of a command of God.”<sup>103</sup>

There must clearly be some relationship between ethical deliberation and the hearing of the command of God for the former enterprise to have any significance in respect of the latter event. However, it is not clear that Biggar’s presentation at this point is entirely correct. Two features of Biggar’s interpretation of Barth are particularly contentious and merit further attention: first, the proposal that Barth has an ethical system; and second, that Barth has a set of ‘moral principles’. The analysis of these two features which follows leads into a discussion of the intention underlying the special ethics of Barth; and the consistency of Barth in writing them. A final section attempts to summarise this issue of the ethics of Barth and the question of casuistry.

#### *i) Barth and ethical system*

There can be no doubt that Biggar is right to note that Barth engages in his special ethics in “a systematic form of ethical deliberation about right conduct.”<sup>104</sup> The real question is whether a systematic approach to ethics necessarily leads to an ethical system. Barth writes that on the one hand, theological ethics must not wish to “fetter the divine command and thus the divine order ... by any system, whether old or new, traditional or progressive,”<sup>105</sup> but on the other hand, theological ethics “will inevitably entail a certain systematisation (*Schematik*).”<sup>106</sup> Thus although Barth approaches the command of God *systematically*, as guided by the ‘formed’ reference grounded in Jesus Christ, it does not seem to follow of logical necessity that an ethical *system* must result. The possibility of a system would depend on the nature of the entity under consideration, and for Barth, given the actualistic nature of the

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<sup>103</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 41. Hauerwas writes more critically that, in Barth, “it is ultimately not clear what kind of relationship should hold between rational deliberation and God’s command,” *Character and the Christian Life*, 142.

<sup>104</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 25.

<sup>105</sup> III/4, 176.

<sup>106</sup> III/4, 176, *KD* III/4, 196. The English translation is therefore slightly misleading, as the German original precisely avoids the term *Systematisierung* (systematisation). As Hunsinger notes correspondingly, “Barth thought systematically about the subject matter of theology, but he did not think in terms of a system,” *How to Read Karl Barth*, 29. A true system in theological ethics is ruled out by the fact that knowledge of God, and thus of the command of God, can only be an event, I/1, 42.

command of God, an ethical system could only conceivably consist of the command of God in its self-explication. Barth takes this task as far as he can, but the particularity and actuality of the command of God rule out any system-building.

For Biggar, however, the existence of an ethical system in Barth's ethics follows from the fact that Barth does not conceive of the command of God to be "an expression of divine arbitrariness."<sup>107</sup> Therefore Biggar argues that if the command of God contradicts the ethical agent's system of 'moral principles', it does so only insofar as she currently has an incomplete or insufficient understanding of the true system.<sup>108</sup> These alleged 'moral principles' must now be investigated more fully.

*ii) Barth and 'moral principles'*

Biggar conceives Barth's ethical system as being based on 'moral principles', albeit principles open to modification and correction. However, at three significant points in his thesis, Biggar seems to misconstrue Barth precisely on this issue.

First, Biggar approvingly quotes Barth's view that 'moral principles' are "'altogether ambiguous and dialectical'" and that they must "'continually be completed and replaced by others.'"<sup>109</sup> For Biggar, this indicates that Barth not only has an ethical system, but is writing positively about the need to modify its 'moral principles' in the light of experience. However, in the original context, 'moral principles' are described in an exclusively *negative* light, as "instruments of the misinterpretation and misapplication of the command,"<sup>110</sup> which are guilty of "provoking the very desires which are excluded by the command, the very attempt at human self-justification and sanctification which is forbidden by God and absolutely fatal."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 41. For Biggar, this is evident whenever Barth writes that God's will has decisively been determined by his free decision to be for humankind in Jesus Christ, *Hastening*, 42.

<sup>108</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 42. This conviction leads Biggar to write that the event of the divine command "occurs in the space defined by moral rules," and thus "the moral act of obedience to a unique divine calling presupposes conformity to the full array of such rules," *Hastening*, 134. Both these statements are dangerously liable to misconstrual. The command of God *per se* is in no way circumscribed or defined by an array of intelligible moral rules to which both the human (and God!) must conform: even for Biggar's own thesis, the reverse is clearly the case.

<sup>109</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 34-35, quoting II/2, 727.

<sup>110</sup> II/2, 727.

<sup>111</sup> II/2, 727.



Second, Biggar approvingly quotes Barth's view of moral wisdom, which is that "the more often it has been exposed to critical reflection, 'the more surely will it again prove its value.'"<sup>112</sup> For Biggar, this again indicates that the 'moral principles' on which the ethical system is based are open to modification and improvement. However, in the original context, Barth is *not* referring to moral wisdom in the form of 'moral principles' at all, but to the "What? of the ethical question."<sup>113</sup> In other words, Barth is extolling the necessity of remaining open to the command of God in all ethical reflection. Correspondingly, Barth writes earlier in the same paragraph that the ethical agent "necessarily sickens and dies from the moment he tries to place the new day given him by God's goodness under the sign of a previously experienced instruction and conversion."<sup>114</sup>

Third, Biggar approvingly quotes a passage from Barth in which Barth states that in confrontation with the Word of God, "[I]t is not as though we had simply to abandon and forget our ideas, thoughts and convictions."<sup>115</sup> For Biggar, this seems to indicate the value of 'moral principles' in the ethical encounter. However, in the original context, Barth is writing about the way in which the ethical agent is to subordinate herself in interpreting Scripture. However, Barth clearly distinguishes this subordination from the way in which the ethical agent is to subordinate herself to God.<sup>116</sup> The retention of the unquestioned validity of her own ideas, thoughts and convictions in encounter with the command of God runs directly counter to Barth's demand that she allow "baptism to be the sign which stands over every new day."<sup>117</sup>

While these three examples illuminate misconstruals of Barth's work on the part of Biggar, however, it is highly significant that all three involve passages in Barth's general ethics and not in his special ethics. They might accordingly be used to provide evidence for another thesis of Biggar, namely that ethical deliberation - and

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<sup>112</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 137, quoting II/2, 648.

<sup>113</sup> II/2, 648.

<sup>114</sup> II/2, 647.

<sup>115</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 35, quoting I/2, 718.

<sup>116</sup> I/2, 717.

<sup>117</sup> II/2, 647.

thus 'moral principles' - play a role in Barth's special ethics which is inconsistent with their apparent rejection in Barth's general ethics.<sup>118</sup> In examining this thesis, two separate issues emerge: the intention of Barth and the consistency of Barth.

### *iii) the intention of Barth*

In intention at least, it is arguable that Barth was at no point attempting to offer 'moral principles' in the sense of an ethical system. In both his general and his special ethics, Barth frequently evidences a determined epistemological humility. In his special ethics, for example, he is adamant that at best, theological ethics is only able to offer "guidance to the individual in the form of an approximation to the knowledge of the divine command and right human action."<sup>119</sup> There is no mention of 'moral principles' or 'working assumptions', the sort of which would be demanded in an ethical system based on dialectical casuistry.<sup>120</sup> Nor is there any hint of exceptional cases being used to baffle moral reasoning into learning, as Biggar desires, "in order that the ethical system might yet extend or refine its grasp."<sup>121</sup> On the contrary, as Biggar himself recognises, Barth writes that "these [exceptional] situations must not be classified or codified so that we may know that in certain circumstances we are confronted by the exception,"<sup>122</sup> and that the "possibility of the exceptional case is the particular possibility of God Himself."<sup>123</sup> His actualistic ontology dictates that "[E]thics will still have to leave the final judgment to God,"<sup>124</sup> for "Christian ethics cannot proclaim a law which is only a human law and obscures the Law of God."<sup>125</sup> The question remains, however, as to whether Barth is consistent

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<sup>118</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 178. It is important to remember that Biggar approves of this inconsistency, in the belief that without these inconsistencies - these attempts to classify the exception and thus establish 'moral principles' - there would be no satisfactory relationship between ethical deliberation and the command of God, *Hastening*, 41. A similar concern - and approval at the perceived later inconsistency - is expressed by Macken, *Autonomy*, 170 and by Willis, *Ethics*, 332-334. The suspicion instantly arises that the perceived shift may have more to do with the different material under consideration than with any underlying methodological shift on the part of Barth.

<sup>119</sup> III/4, 31.

<sup>120</sup> It is therefore inappropriate for Matheny to write that "[D]ogmatic and ethical principles are attained with the knowledge of Jesus Christ who is known in faith," *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 146.

<sup>121</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 34.

<sup>122</sup> III/4, 411, referenced on Biggar, *Hastening*, 38.

<sup>123</sup> III/4, 413, referenced on Biggar, *Hastening*, 32.

<sup>124</sup> III/4, 31.

<sup>125</sup> III/4, 66. And therefore, in the words of William Werpehowski, "[R]ealistic discernment of what we ought to do, in the moral landscape of God's world, prescribes a practical readiness to suspend the

in respect of these noble intentions in his special ethics.

*iv) the consistency of Barth*

While Barth's express intention is to limit his special ethics to offering guidance and direction, Biggar suggests that there are moments where, in contrast to this intention, Barth does not hesitate "to note the distinguishing characteristics of different kinds of extraordinary case."<sup>126</sup> To illustrate his case, Biggar cites and discusses the examples Barth offers in connection with the taking of human life.<sup>127</sup> In these serious matters, Biggar notes, Barth stipulates that the ethical agent must be motivated by love for God, the desire to obey God, and love of the neighbour, and that the act must be carried out with joy, gratitude, and resolution, and thus in the faith that any sin involved will be forgiven.<sup>128</sup> Now it would seem clear that Barth would posit these stipulations in connection with *any* act of the ethical agent. However, Biggar posits that against his stated intention, Barth then gives further conditions common to the exceptional cases of taking human life: for example, in discussing abortion, Barth argues that the exceptional case will occur only *in extremis*, where the other alternatives have been exhausted and where a choice cannot be avoided between the life of the mother and the life of the child.<sup>129</sup> For Biggar, the inconsistency is clear.

The real question, however, is whether Barth truly introduces these qualifications in terms of 'moral principles' or not. And in this respect, for all the vehemence of his presentation in respect of each individual moral situation, it seems wise to let Barth's prolegomenon to the exceptional case of permitted abortion speak for itself. Barth writes that

[T]his is the exceptional case which calls for discussion. In squarely facing it, we are not opening a side-door to the crime (*Frevel*) which is so rampant in this sphere. We

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reasons for publicly warranting this or that (commanded) act," in "Hearing the Divine Command," 71.

<sup>126</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 36. Robert Willis correspondingly argues that there is introduced in Barth's special ethics at this point "an obvious tension, if not a serious conflict, into his earlier statements about the definiteness of the divine command," in "Some Difficulties in Barth's Development of Special Ethics," in *RS* 6 (1970), 154.

<sup>127</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 36-39.

<sup>128</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 36, based on III/4, 402, 410, 423.

<sup>129</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 36, based on III/4, 421.

refer to God's possibility and His specific command. We cannot try to exclude this.<sup>130</sup>

And thus while Barth proceeds "to lay down some decisive qualifications,"<sup>131</sup> he adds explicitly that his ethical stipulation in this instance, regarding the risk to the life of the mother and of the child, is relevant "only in general terms and in the sense of a guiding line (*nur in bewußter Allgemeinheit freilich, nur im Sinne einer ernstlich zu beachtenden Richtlinie*)."<sup>132</sup> This circumscription of Barth's 'qualification' of the exceptional case of abortion suggests strongly that Barth neither loses sight at this point of the actualism which underlies his entire moral ontology nor desires to introduce 'moral principles' or 'casuistry' to undermine that ontology. As Willis notes, these criteria are "set forth as guiding considerations."<sup>133</sup> And if it is argued that Barth does not repeat this explicit circumscription before his treatment of the other exceptional cases in this area of ethics, then it must surely be asked whether this is really necessary.

However, it is important to draw a suitably balanced conclusion. On the one hand, throughout the special ethics - even in reference to the taking of life - Barth insists that a full specification of the ethical event is precluded. And this is true even in the hypothetical (but impossible) case where an individual has "full knowledge of definite general spheres and relationships in which the ethical event takes place."<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> III/4, 420, *KD* III/4, 481. The English translation here misses a vital connotation of the German word *Frevel*, namely that the relevant crime is not only heinous but also sinful, i.e., it is sacrilege.

<sup>131</sup> III/4, 421.

<sup>132</sup> III/4, 421, *KD* III/4, 480. The force of the terms *bewußt* and *freilich* are lost in translation, and suggest precisely that Barth is *conscious* of generalisation here. The term *Linie* calls to mind the *gewisse große Linien* (*KD* IV/2, 619) of the commanding of Jesus Christ.

<sup>133</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 375.

<sup>134</sup> III/4, 31. Biggar's assertion that the command of God is (at least in principle) fully intelligible to human moral reason, in *Hastening*, 42, is at least challenged by this statement from Barth. The weakness perhaps lies in Biggar's insistence on the creaturely intelligibility of the divine 'ratio'. It does not seem self-evident that the divine decision in eternity to be for humanity in Jesus Christ should give rise to an eternally fixed ethical system that would both take into account every contingent eventuality and simultaneously be in any sense genuinely 'intelligible' to an ethical agent. It is consequently unclear by what intrinsic necessity any divine 'ratio' which might exist could or should be *de facto* intelligible to a) creaturely and b) sinful human minds in the first place, without both jeopardising the miracle and the mystery of the divine being and act and risking the separation of that being and act. Biggar is keen to secure a 'relative validity' for human reasoning about moral matters, *Hastening*, 42, but fails to recognise that such validity for Barth could only be a dependent validity which is granted in an event of grace. From the opposite perspective, it is interesting to note Willis' complaint in respect of Barth's ethics which bemoans "the inadequacy of an approach to the ethical that elevates the rational at the expense of ignoring the unconscious, irrational, and surd dimensions of the human," *Ethics*, 389. Quite how this desired approach might be realised - either in theory or in

On the other hand, Werpehowski is right to note the commitment of Barth “to making his descriptions of the ethical situations ever more concrete through specification and further specification of the spheres of God’s activity.”<sup>135</sup> Therefore, as Willis perceptively notes,

... no matter how strenuously these criteria are articulated merely as guidelines that in no way minimize the importance and necessity of immediate obedience to the command, it is difficult to avoid the overtones of an ethic of rules or principles.<sup>136</sup>

And therefore perhaps the soundest conclusion lies in the view of Gustafson, who argues that while Barth’s special ethics is generally coherent with his general ethics, “there are strains in the system as ethics gets elaborated.”<sup>137</sup> A sympathetic appraisal of this tension would be to suggest that in his general ethics, Barth is clearing away debris from the history of the discipline of theological ethics in order to make room for a secure and actualistic foundation for the discipline on the command of God. With this unequivocal foundation in place, Barth is therefore slightly more at liberty in his special ethics to explore the boundaries of the usefulness of the ‘formed’ reference in terms of the exceptional case. Nevertheless, it remains the case that his actualistically grounded intentions not only drive the structure but also control the logic of his entire presentation of special ethics.<sup>138</sup>

v) *an evaluation of Barth and casuistry*

The thesis that Barth operates with an ethical system and employs a method of dialectical casuistry is a bold one, which is dependent upon proving first that ‘moral principles’ exist in Barth’s ethics and second that they have been explicitly ‘systematised’. It is not clear that satisfactory proof of either claim has been offered.

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practice - is difficult to see.

<sup>135</sup> Werpehowski, “Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth,” 309. It seems a little churlish in this respect for Gustafson to posit that “[T]he patterns and information drawn from many sources make Barth more certain about what the divine command will be in some circumstances than in others,” *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, 32.

<sup>136</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 391.

<sup>137</sup> Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, 26.

<sup>138</sup> What certainly cannot be allowed at this point for Barth is any kind of distinction between the ‘ontological’ situation of the ethical agent under the command and the ‘empirical’ situation of the ethical agent in her context, the kind of which Willis desires, *Ethics*, 334. Any such distinction would instantly rend the fabric of Barth’s moral ontology. While the ethical agent may indeed be confronted by a range of *empirical* possibilities about which she may indeed *empirically* deliberate, it is not the possibilities *per se* which “necessitate a choice,” *Ethics*, 333, but the ontological situation of the ethical agent under the command of God, in which the one true choice of obedience is commanded.



If one were minded to classify the ethical guidelines which Barth derives from the ‘formed’ reference as ‘moral principles’, then Biggar’s thesis might at one level be tenable - but only under three conditions. First, in deriving and discussing these ‘moral principles’, there would have to be incorporated Barth’s fundamental premise denying a “merely relative and quantitative scope and significance of the fall.”<sup>139</sup> A practice of dialectical casuistry true to Barth must never allow human judgement of ethical matters to compete with the judgement of God. Second, it would have to be borne in mind that these ‘moral principles’ would have no existence outwith the context of the will of God and the spheres of God’s activity as revealed and actualised in the event of the command of God. As Werpehowski notes, “human ‘moral’ sensibilities cannot be considered autonomously, independent of the revelation of God’s command.”<sup>140</sup> Third, and as a direct consequence, a practice of dialectical casuistry true to Barth would have to follow his recognition that the divine command as it is directed and applied to the ethical agent consists only in her relationship to Jesus Christ.<sup>141</sup> In this personal and particular relationship, true obedience consists for Barth not in satisfying ‘moral principles’, but in her exercising true freedom in offering herself to God in her obedience.<sup>142</sup>

One of the main reasons why Biggar approves of ‘moral principles’ in theological ethics is his concern that Barth’s ethics “does not allow the formulation of any publicly intelligible justification of moral decisions.”<sup>143</sup> However, William Werpehowski argues that, for Barth, “[T]he justification requirement, though essential, belongs somewhat more to the periphery of the ethics of the divine command.”<sup>144</sup> Indeed, it might be argued that this requirement is not truly essential

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<sup>139</sup> II/2, 532.

<sup>140</sup> Werpehowski, “Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth,” 307.

<sup>141</sup> II/2, 539.

<sup>142</sup> III/4, 13. Trevor Hart finds the weakness in Biggar’s view of Barth’s ethics at this point, accusing Biggar of overlooking “that the command renews and is part of an ongoing relationship between two subjects, a ‘history’ as Barth calls it,” *Regarding Karl Barth*, 86.

<sup>143</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 24. This attests to Biggar’s wider concern that ethical claims should not be removed “from the scope of critical scrutiny,” in “A Case for Casuistry in the Church,” in *MT* 6.1 (1989), 40.

<sup>144</sup> Werpehowski, “Hearing the Divine Command,” 70, in *ZdTh* 15.1 (1999). Werpehowski argues that Biggar “tends to place moral justification ... a bit too close to the center of Barth’s ethics,” with the consequence that “the stress would be placed too much on the human side of the ethical event,” in

for Barth at all, given that he argues of the individual that “[M]uch can be demanded of him, but what is demanded in the opinion of the adherents of an apologetico-theological ethics is not actually demanded.”<sup>145</sup> Clough strikes an appropriate balance when he observes that

Barth certainly intends that ethical decisions should be justifiable to other Christians, but the translation of this justification to a wider society will always be a secondary process with no guarantee of success.<sup>146</sup>

In any event, the central focus of the discipline of theological ethics remains on the God who reveals the command of God to the ethical agent in the ethical event.

It is precisely this dependence of theological ethics on revelation which renders Biggar’s accusation of casuistry on the part of Barth so problematic. Much truer to Barth’s intentions in light of this dependence is to recognise the absolute necessity but ultimate provisionality of all human ethical thinking before the command of God. The theological ethics of Barth therefore remains, as Clough observes, “dialectical” at this point,<sup>147</sup> betraying what McKenny refers to as an “ineliminable heterogeneity.”<sup>148</sup> In Barth’s actualistic ontology, no system of casuistry and no number of ‘moral principles’ can ever hope to grasp the revelation of God or to anticipate the moral encounter between God and the ethical agent.

## **D - summary**

The conception of the discipline of theological ethics which Barth offers is one of “instructional preparation for the ethical event.”<sup>149</sup> Despite the limitations of the ethical agent and the particular nature of the command of God, the existence of a ‘formed’ reference between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of the

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“Hearing the Divine Command,” 70. Simon Rae writes that “[A]n evangelical ethics that wishes to say anything in the contemporary world, and hopes to be taken seriously, must treat both [Roman and Anglo-Catholic moral theology and secular jurisprudence] with a great deal more respect than Barth managed,” in “Karl Barth’s Theological Ethics,” *SJT* 25 (1972), 419. While Barth thought that evangelical ethics had something important to say to the contemporary world, it is less clear that Barth was concerned about being ‘taken seriously’ in the sense in which that might mean a satisfying of the particular criteria that other moral, religious, or secular ethics might set or have set for themselves.

<sup>145</sup> II/2, 522.

<sup>146</sup> Clough, *Hearing the Divine Command*, forthcoming.

<sup>147</sup> Clough, *Hearing the Divine Command*, forthcoming.

<sup>148</sup> McKenny, “Heterogeneity and Ethical Deliberation,” 221.

<sup>149</sup> III/4, 18.



command of God both enables and compels the ethical agent to engage in a practice of ethical reflection which “is itself an ethical act.”<sup>150</sup> Through such reflection, the ethical agent can gain a broad but not infallible outline of the ethical terrain upon which encounter with the command of God will occur. Barth’s venture is to expound and explain this terrain as well as he can, without engaging in illustration or concretisation which is either inappropriate to his academic intentions or unfaithful to the command of God. Further specification in the form of ‘moral principles’ or an ‘ethical system’ is thus neither possible nor desirable.

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<sup>150</sup> II/2, 658.



## **§4 The Practice of Theological Ethics**

*... we should live in this surrender to God which he both wills and effects. - Barth<sup>1</sup>*

This chapter shifts focus from the theory of the discipline of theological ethics to its practice. Barth writes of the practice of theological ethics that “man *asks* because he *is asked*.”<sup>2</sup> Hence the practice of theological ethics is itself an ethical event within the history of the covenant of grace, through which the ethical agent has to traverse a “road of knowledge which corresponds to the inner life of God Himself.”<sup>3</sup> The effects of the actualistic ontology which underlies Barth’s accounts of both the command of God and the discipline of theological ethics are apparent once more in his construal of the practice of theological ethics. This chapter proceeds in four sections. The first section presents Barth’s view of the practice of theological ethics. The second and third sections deal respectively with the role of Scripture and the role of the Church in that practice. Finally, Barth’s construal of the practice is considered in respect of two fundamental criticisms: a first which accuses it of abstraction and a second which accuses it of neglecting the Church.

### **A - the practice of theological ethics**

The discipline of ethics is, for Barth, a necessary one. Barth describes ethics as “the special task of dogmatics that the Law as the form of the Gospel has imposed on us.”<sup>4</sup> As such, as Paul Matheny notes, “ethical reflection is not theoretical deliberation about ethical practice but is itself an ethical act.”<sup>5</sup> In view of the necessity of theological ethics, this section considers three aspects of its practice:

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<sup>1</sup> II/2, 632.

<sup>2</sup> *TCL*, 32. Barth notes that “the question of the command of God, of what man must do according to God’s will, is as such the beginning of the human reaction appropriate to God’s action. As man asks it, therefore, he is already on the way to obedience,” *TCL*, 32.

<sup>3</sup> II/2, 551.

<sup>4</sup> II/2, 513, emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> Matheny, *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 209. He observes correspondingly that “the field of moral inquiry and that of theological practice are inseparable,” *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 203.

first, the openness intrinsic to each engagement; second, the continuity underlying each engagement; and third, the limitations in each engagement.

*i) the openness of ethical engagement*

In keeping with the radically actualistic nature of the command of God, the practice of theological ethics demands that the ethical agent focus on remaining radically open to the command of God and its ever-new demands and possibilities. When the question of theological ethics is posed, Barth notes that “we approach God as those who are ignorant in and with all that they already know, and stand in dire need of divine instruction and conversion.”<sup>6</sup> In an important passage, he continues:

[W]e are then ready, with a view to our next decision, to bracket and hold in reserve all that we think we know concerning the rightness and goodness of our past and present decisions, all the rules and axioms, however good, all the inner and outer laws and necessities under which we have hitherto placed ourselves and perhaps do so again. None of these has an unlimited claim to be valid again to-day as it was valid yesterday. None of them is identical with the divine command. Even at best none of them is more than a refraction of the divine command in the dim and fallacious prism of our own life and understanding.<sup>7</sup>

This statement has profound consequences for the roles of personal experience and received wisdom in the practice of theological ethics. In the actualistic context of the command of God, all previous answers to the ethical question are seen to be relativised, for they cannot be a knowledge of the current will and command of God.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, observes Barth, “the goodness of God - including specifically the goodness of His work for our sanctification - is new every morning.”<sup>9</sup> Faced with this constant newness in the command of God, the only viable practice of theological ethics is one which involves complete openness to the command, an openness which must be constantly renewed and “cannot remain somewhere behind us as the past of

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<sup>6</sup> II/2, 646.

<sup>7</sup> II/2, 646-647. And so, Barth asserts, “all our answers that we think we know are weighed again and thrown into the melting-point by the What? of the ethical question,” II/2, 648. Theological ethics is for Barth thus explicitly in the same position as dogmatics, which is similarly “always being thrown back to the beginning and having to make a fresh start,” I/1, 14. Biggar thus seems misguided to suggest that for Barth, “[W]e must expect God’s command through our normative ethics, not outside them,” in “Hearing God’s Command,” 112.

<sup>8</sup> II/2, 646.

<sup>9</sup> II/2, 646.

an instruction and conversion already accomplished.”<sup>10</sup> Barth asks pointedly of the individual, “[W]hen does he not need to take new steps on the path to obedience and therefore to ask for new directions?”<sup>11</sup> He thus demands that

... the action of man must be one which always and in all directions is open, eager to learn, capable of modification, perpetually ready, in obedience to the exclusively sovereign command of God, to allow itself to be orientated afresh and in very different ways from those which might have seemed possible and necessary on the basis of man’s own ideas of his ability and capacity.<sup>12</sup>

For Barth, the actualisation of this dynamic relationship of encounter with God and openness to the command of God is a matter of prayer - of invocation, thanksgiving, and praise.<sup>13</sup> Faced by the ethical question, then, it is precisely in the practice of theological ethics that the ethical agent can receive “instruction in the art of correct asking about God’s will and *open* hearing of God’s command.”<sup>14</sup>

## *ii) the continuity of ethical engagement*

The radical openness of ethical engagement does not, however, entirely vitiate the past experience and knowledge of the ethical agent. Barth calls upon the ethical agent to recognise that

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<sup>10</sup> II/2, 647. For Barth, to know God means “to know Him again and again, in ever new ways,” II/1, 322, and thus “no one can be a child of God without ever hearing anew,” I/2, 381-382. Hence for Barth, dogmatics (and thus also ethics) can have “no comprehensive views, no final conclusions and results,” I/2, 868: it is always a *theologia viatorum*, II/1, 209.

<sup>11</sup> *TCL*, 32. Barth writes, “Does not the beginning, and therefore the question of the will of God, always have to be a new event? The continuity of obedience can be guaranteed on man’s side only if he is not too proud always to begin again at the beginning with this question,” *TCL*, 33. Barth asserts that “[O]ur instruction for that life still proceeds and is not, therefore, completed. Grace has still to be continually given and received by us,” II/2, 607. Johnson notes that “Barth views ethical inquiry primarily as a process of continually putting one’s own preconceived notions of the moral life into question,” *The Mystery of God*, 154, while Matheny comments that “the theologian must, in principle, remain open to revelation especially in the question of ethical agency,” *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> III/4, 629.

<sup>13</sup> *TCL*, 89. Barth therefore believes that harmony with God’s sovereign decision “must be prayed and sought for as the grace of God,” II/2, 646. Matheny observes that “[T]he significance of prayer for Barth’s understanding of theology and the unity of dogmatics and ethics cannot be underestimated,” *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 235 n.36.

<sup>14</sup> *TCL*, 34, emphasis added. Eberhard Jüngel correspondingly notes that “to all intents and purposes, ethics becomes possible as instruction in the art of asking in an appropriate way what is to be done,” in *Barth-Studien*, 158. Theological ethics, according to Barth, can teach the ethical agent “how to put that question relevantly and how to look forward openly, attentively, and willingly to the answer that God alone can and does give,” *TCL*, 34. Barth notes that “[T]his enquiry cannot be replaced by even the most penetrating systematic or intuitive analysis of the situation as such and the objective and subjective factors which condition it. For, obviously, this enquiry only begins where an analysis of that kind leaves off,” II/2, 640.

... we always come from the school of the divine command and that we have not been in vain to that school, always bringing with us all kinds of more or less well-founded hypotheses and convictions that the command of God demands from us. To forget all this could not possibly be a good presupposition and basis for ethical reflection.<sup>15</sup>

While the divine command is to be heard afresh in every new moment, the ethical agent who is commanded lives in and with a history that cannot and should not be excluded in the practice of theological ethics: in Barth's words, she is "no unwritten page."<sup>16</sup> Barth therefore writes that each encounter with the command of God must involve a practice of preliminary testing:

... what we will and do should take place in this self-examination - with a glance backward at what we willed and did formerly, and forward to what we shall will and do in the path that is now to be pursued or not, and therefore with a readiness for the next thing, or rather for the judgment which we approach in and with it - this is our proper attitude to the divine decision which awaits our own decision in God's command.<sup>17</sup>

Barth writes of the ethical answer of yesterday that "[T]he more truly it derives from previous ethical reflection and testing, the less will this process prove injurious to it, the more surely will it again prove its value."<sup>18</sup> This value is not one of providing the individual with an answer to the ethical question of today in a fashion divorced from encounter with the command of God. Rather, the value emerges in that

... the very recollection of earlier instruction and conversion, in so far as it is genuine, will be an invitation to us to fulfil the same movement, to accept this new beginning of our life and understanding.<sup>19</sup>

And consequently, for Barth, "our present deeds must be accompanied by a searching question as to the will of God in regard to our future deeds."<sup>20</sup> The encounter with the command of God in ethical action is thus "not in any sense an obstacle, but a cause and summons that we should reflect and prepare an account."<sup>21</sup> This reflection, as Matheny notes, "is itself an occasion of encounter with and reference to God, an encounter which is made possible and complete by God's

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<sup>15</sup> II/2, 646.

<sup>16</sup> *TCL*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> II/2, 635.

<sup>18</sup> II/2, 648.

<sup>19</sup> II/2, 647. Barth acknowledges that "even if our enquiry as to God's command leads us necessarily to a different answer to-day from that of yesterday, then no wrong is done to the former," II/2, 648. William Werpehowski helpfully notes that "a claim about the way we are to prepare for our encounter with the divine command is not identical to a claim about the nature or mechanism of the 'hearing' itself," in "Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth," 307.

<sup>20</sup> II/2, 639.

<sup>21</sup> II/2, 636.

turning to humanity in Jesus Christ.”<sup>22</sup>

This continual movement to openness takes place within a history of encounter between God and the individual that is accorded a ‘formed’ reference by the history of Jesus Christ in the covenant of grace.<sup>23</sup> As Barth notes, “each of our decisions and responsibilities as such is an anticipation in miniature of the total responsibility which, with our whole life, we fulfil before God.”<sup>24</sup> Controlling this life should be the prayerful invocation of God, for Barth writes of this as “an action that characterizes the event of the Christian life ... [and] controls it in all its dimensions.”<sup>25</sup> The value of ethical reflection within this prayer-centred life encompassed in the covenant of grace thus lies in the formation of a creaturely *habitus* which builds upon past perseverance in the necessary openness of ethical encounter, in order to determine the best present practice of theological ethics and in anticipation of the further ethical reflection of the future. The place of rational deliberation in the practice of theological ethics therefore remains utterly circumscribed. Contrary to the view of Willis, rational reflection does not have the task of “determining what the command of God is for a given situation.”<sup>26</sup> Rather, it has the task of illuminating that situation as an arena of encounter between God and the ethical agent and of demanding her openness to the command which comes as the Law of the Gospel.<sup>27</sup> It is perseverance in this very human discipline that represents “the discipline of the new beginning of

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<sup>22</sup> Matheny, *Dogmatics and Ethics*, iv.

<sup>23</sup> III/4, 26.

<sup>24</sup> II/2, 642.

<sup>25</sup> *TCL*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 423. To support his view, Willis references Barth’s statement about an individual in respect of considering birth control, “[S]urely he is not allowed to dispense with rational reflection or to renounce an intelligent attitude at this point,” III/4, 271, at *Ethics*, 423. Barth’s argument at this particular point, however, is against someone who would leave all choice and decision in birth control behind and “leave things to pot luck, i.e., to chance,” III/4, 271. By contrast, and *contra* the reading of Willis, Barth demands that those who use birth control “must be asked whether they do so under the divine command and with a sense of responsibility to God, and not out of caprice,” III/4, 270. And therefore Barth affirms that “the providence and will of God in the course of nature has in each case to be freshly discovered by the believer who hears and obeys His word, and apprehended and put into operation by him in personal responsibility, in the freedom of choice and decision,” III/4, 271. Willis also cites Barth’s statement that an individual reflecting on going to war “must analyse fully the prevailing conditions and make his own decision,” III/4, 465-466, at *Ethics*, 423. However, Barth writes precisely there that the individual “personally is asked whether he hears the commandment,” III/4, 465. There is no escaping Barth’s actualism at this point.

<sup>27</sup> *TCL*, 35.



our life and understanding brought about by moral reflection.”<sup>28</sup>

### *iii) the limitations of ethical engagement*

While affirming the importance of ethical reflection in theological ethics, it is ultimately openness within theological ethics that is the over-riding determination in practice. For Barth, the question of theological ethics - ‘What ought we to do?’ - will always have to be asked “without having an answer ready and being able to furnish it ourselves.”<sup>29</sup> As Willis rightly notes, “obedience lies in a recognition of the sovereignty of the command, not in an assumed knowledge of it.”<sup>30</sup> Barth notes that even a theological ethics informed by the ‘formed’ reference will be able neither to define or determine the ethical event nor to predict the command of God.<sup>31</sup> It therefore cannot save the individual

... from what is expected of him, namely, to dare to make for himself the leap of choice, decision and action, which he must make for himself and on his own responsibility - the leap which we have called practical casuistry in real *casus conscientiae*.<sup>32</sup>

Thus the ethical agent cannot “tarry eternally in ethical reflection and deliberation, and ... fail to press on to *ethos*, i.e., to ethical decision and action.”<sup>33</sup> As Willis notes, “[T]o pose the question of human response to the command already presupposes that one is on the way to action.”<sup>34</sup> On this way to action, theological ethics will, for Barth, never be able to offer more than guidance to ethical action.<sup>35</sup>

## **B - the use of Scripture in theological ethics**

As noted in the previous chapters, Scripture has the role of witnessing to the command of God which encounters the ethical agent as part of a wider witnessing to

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<sup>28</sup> II/2, 647. Barth writes that “the law of repetition and renewal is the law of ethical reflection,” II/2, 648, and more expansively, that “[T]he principle of necessary repetition and renewal, and not a law of stability, is the law of the spiritual growth and continuity of our life,” II/2, 647.

<sup>29</sup> II/2, 645.

<sup>30</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 179.

<sup>31</sup> III/4, 30.

<sup>32</sup> III/4, 16.

<sup>33</sup> IV/2, 712.

<sup>34</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 181.

<sup>35</sup> III/4, 31. Theological ethics, therefore, cannot make decisions about the obedience or disobedience of the individual, but “can only indicate that in the here and now the obedience or disobedience of man has also taken place, and does and will do so, in relation to God’s command,” *TCL*, 34.

the theological reality which surrounds and includes her. In the power of the Holy Spirit and by way of the witness of the individuals in the Bible, it is the case that “the God who has spoken and acted in relation to them becomes our God,”<sup>36</sup> and also that “[T]heir task becomes our task.”<sup>37</sup> There thus arises both an appropriate passivity and an appropriate activity for the practice of theological ethics in respect of Scripture.

On the one hand, the practice of theological ethics requires a certain passivity. Barth states that “instead of our making use of Scripture at every stage, it is Scripture itself which uses us.”<sup>38</sup> And therefore Barth writes of Christians in respect of Scripture that

[T]hey are never recipients of revelation in the sense that they appropriate revelation and can then recognise and evaluate it for themselves. They are recipients of revelation in the sense that revelation meets them as the master and they become obedient to it.<sup>39</sup>

Werner Jeanrond posits that for Barth, the only acceptable response of the ethical agent “is obedience and the willingness to let the Bible interpret him or herself.”<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, there is also a required active dimension to the use of Scripture in the practice of theological ethics. Barth states that “for the sake of redeeming our life we abide by faith and therefore by this looking away from self and looking to Scripture.”<sup>41</sup> He posits that while the door of the Bible texts can be opened only from within, it is “another thing whether we wait at this door or leave it for other doors, whether we want to enter and knock or sit idly facing it.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, this looking away from self and to Scripture and the associated readiness and willingness and responsibility requires prayer. Barth insists that “we cannot read and understand Holy Scripture without prayer, that is, without invoking the grace of God.”<sup>43</sup> Finally, the approach to and reading of Scripture must be followed by further action, such

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<sup>36</sup> II/2, 706.

<sup>37</sup> II/2, 706.

<sup>38</sup> I/2, 738.

<sup>39</sup> I/2, 543.

<sup>40</sup> Werner G. Jeanrond, “Karl Barth’s Hermeneutics,” in *Reckoning with Barth*, ed. Nigel Biggar (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988), 88.

<sup>41</sup> I/2, 739. For Barth this looking to Scripture is *not* supplemented by a second step in which “we turn our backs on Scripture, because we have now been taught and comforted by it, involves the transition to an independent answering of our own concerns and questions,” I/2, 739. By contrast, he insists, “everything has already happened and will continually happen in this first and single act,” I/2, 740.

<sup>42</sup> I/2, 533.

<sup>43</sup> I/2, 684.

that “what is declared to us must become our very own, and indeed in such a way that now we really do become *conscientes* ... assuming this witness into our own responsibility.”<sup>44</sup>

These active and the passive dimensions of theological ethics in respect of Scripture are linked by the event of the grace of the living God. In this way, Scripture prepares the way in theological ethics for the required “openness of heart which is not an end in itself but which has to be demonstrated and realised in a specific obedience which is always new.”<sup>45</sup> Barth asserts that

... the Bible is a living, indeed, in the light of its content, an eternally living thing, so that from the study of it we can expect new truths to meet us - truths which were not accessible to the most conscientious enquiry of yesterday or day before yesterday, because the Bible itself has not yet brought them to light.<sup>46</sup>

In the light of these truths and the command of God to which they witness, Barth asserts that “there can be no question of quietism in the sphere of Holy Scripture.”<sup>47</sup>

### **C - the role of the Church in theological ethics**

To analyse the role of the Church in the practice of theological ethics is to move into the doctrine of the Church. Barth’s ecclesiology is dominated by two aspects: its Christocentrism and its actualism. First, Barth notes that the Church exists “only in the power of the divine decision, act and revelation accomplished and effective in Jesus Christ.”<sup>48</sup> This means that for Barth, “the Christian community exists as He, Jesus Christ, exists,”<sup>49</sup> and therefore that “its being is a predicate and dimension of His, and not *vice versa*.”<sup>50</sup> Second, Barth writes that

[T]he Christian community is not a mere phenomenon, however distinguished. It is an event. Otherwise it is not the Christian community. In correspondence with the hidden

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<sup>44</sup> I/2, 736.

<sup>45</sup> II/2, 700.

<sup>46</sup> I/2, 684.

<sup>47</sup> I/2, 677.

<sup>48</sup> IV/3, 727. Indeed, for Barth, “ecclesiological assertions arise only as they are borrowed from Christology,” II/1, 149.

<sup>49</sup> IV/3, 754.

<sup>50</sup> IV/3, 754. Hence Webster is correct to note that “for Barth the Christian community is most appropriately understood not as a natural state of affairs, a contingent social, cultural and linguistic entity, but as a *spiritual* reality, wholly referred to Jesus Christ,” in *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 219-220.

being of Jesus Christ Himself, it is an earthly-historical event.<sup>51</sup>

This statement demonstrates how Barth has actualised the doctrine of ecclesiology, that is, that the being of the Church is conceived as an “*actus purus*, i.e., a divine action which is self-originating and ... to be understood only in terms of itself.”<sup>52</sup>

Barth links these two aspects of the Church together in writing of

... the relationship, the fellowship, the unity which exists, which has to be continued and renewed, which has to be constantly founded anew, between Jesus Christ on the one hand and the Christian community, the Christian and man in general on the other.<sup>53</sup>

The events within this history of the true Church occur only “as the act and truth of Jesus Christ in the power and mystery of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>54</sup>

This construal of ecclesiology means for Barth that the role of the Church in the practice of theological ethics is important yet circumscribed. In what follows, the first section considers the nature of the authority of the Church, while the subsequent sections explore the Church first as the context in which the ethical agent exists and second as an ethical agent in itself.

#### *i) the authority of the Church*

Barth posits that “the Church is constituted as the Church by a common hearing and receiving of the Word of God,”<sup>55</sup> and that the Church is preserved “by the active freedom of the Word of God.”<sup>56</sup> In this actualistic sense, then, Barth posits that the Church is “unceasingly under the authoritative claim of Scripture,”<sup>57</sup> and is thus “apostolic and therefore catholic when it exists on the basis of Scripture and in conformity with it.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> IV/2, 696.

<sup>52</sup> I/1, 41. Barth writes that “[I]ts act is its being, its status is dynamic, its essence its existence,” IV/1, 650. Hence the Church simply *is* in the event of divine action in which God lets people live as His servants, and in which they respond accordingly, IV/1, 650-651.

<sup>53</sup> IV/1, 650.

<sup>54</sup> I/2, 577.

<sup>55</sup> I/2, 588.

<sup>56</sup> I/2, 690.

<sup>57</sup> I/2, 690.

<sup>58</sup> IV/1, 722. This view presupposes Barth’s actualistic view of Scripture, in which is continually maintained “the distinction between Scripture itself and all human conceptions of it,” I/2, 694. It is therefore only as the Word of God speaks through the witness of Scripture that it rules the Church, I/2, 693, and constitutes the community, III/4, 83.

In the light of this true authority of the Word of God in Scripture, the authority of the Church itself only arises when the existence of the Church “is a unitary *act* of obedience, an *act* of subjection to a higher authority.”<sup>59</sup> Barth explains that

... the witness of the presence of the Church has a definite authority to the extent that it is the witness of the living and present Word of God, and takes place in that response to its transmission and in recognition of its definite authority.<sup>60</sup>

The authority and glory of God thus never become a possession or a predicate of the Church, but must ever be received anew as the Church places itself in obedience to the Word of God.<sup>61</sup> Barth cautions that

[A]t every moment and in every situation the danger threatens that members of the Church may want the Word of God without God, bringing it under their power and understanding, and applying it according to their own good pleasure.<sup>62</sup>

In opposition to this grasping attitude, Christoph Schwöbel notes that for Barth, “the Word of God is not a ‘given’ in the quasi-substantial objectivity of ecclesial doctrine, but only in the event of its being given in the unity of discourse and act.”<sup>63</sup> And therefore Barth argues that the authority of the Word of God “cannot be assimilated by the Church, to reappear as the divine authority of the Church.”<sup>64</sup> By contrast, ecclesial authority is both genuine and human, and reflects “the authority of God in His revelation in relation to all other authorities in the human sphere.”<sup>65</sup>

## *ii) the Church as ethical context*

There is no way for Barth in which the individual Christian can escape the sphere of the Church. Barth argues that “[T]o be awakened to faith and to be added to the community are one and the same thing,”<sup>66</sup> and therefore that if the ethical agent were

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<sup>59</sup> I/2, 574. Indeed, Barth writes that “[I]t is not the Church apart from this act,” I/2, 574, and thus “[I]t is always and everywhere a living question, whether the Church *is*,” IV/1, 658, emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> I/2, 573.

<sup>61</sup> I/2, 577. The authority and glory of the Church are analogous to the holiness of the Church in that they are created by the Holy Spirit and “ascribed to the Church,” IV/1, 686. Thus the holiness and authority of the Church are never that of God but only reflect that of God in the creaturely world.

<sup>62</sup> I/2, 807.

<sup>63</sup> Schwöbel, “Theology,” 31.

<sup>64</sup> I/2, 579.

<sup>65</sup> I/2, 587.

<sup>66</sup> IV/1, 688.

not in the Church, she would not be in Christ.<sup>67</sup> Involvement with the Church means a continuing history of engagement, for Barth insists that “the active life of man willed and demanded by God is primarily and decisively the active life of the community of Christ.”<sup>68</sup> Wolfgang Lienemann correspondingly argues that the ethics of Barth has “as its empirical base (*Boden*) the visible Church.”<sup>69</sup> Within the Church, then, the ethical agent must recognise the authority of the Church, in all its indirectness, formality and relativity.<sup>70</sup>

The authority of the Church is such that there exists for Barth “a definite responsibility to definite decisions made earlier and elsewhere in the Church.”<sup>71</sup> In ecclesial debate, then, the Church of yesterday will have precedence in terms of being heard first, and therefore Barth writes that the Church of today will “make our own confession only in response to its confession.”<sup>72</sup> However, Barth readily acknowledges that in the confession of the Church, “I will certainly have to reckon with the possibility of falsehood and error.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Barth writes of the Church that

[I]ts acts and achievements, its confessions and orders, its theology and the ethics advocated by it and lived out by its members, never were and never are infallible at any point; ... they are most fallible where there is the arbitrary attempt to deck them out with infallibility - not least the ethics lived out by Christians.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *TCL*, 188.

<sup>68</sup> III/4, 486. Barth writes that “[A] life is not Christian if it is not life in and with the [Christian] community,” III/4, 496. He argues further that the Word would not be heard and received if the ethical agent tried to withdraw from this community of the Church, I/2, 588.

<sup>69</sup> Wolfgang Lienemann, “Das Gebot Gottes als ‘Ereignis’,” in *ZdTh* 15.2 (1999), 175.

<sup>70</sup> I/2, 589.

<sup>71</sup> I/2, 647.

<sup>72</sup> I/2, 596. Biggar correctly summarises that, for Barth, “[T]he moral tradition of the Church may not be worthy of unconditional loyalty or unqualified conformity, but it does deserve a very serious hearing,” *Hastening*, 126. It is much less clear, however, that Biggar is justified in continuing that “Barth is not prepared to say simply that the command of God is mediated by the ecclesial tradition ... [but] does seem to argue that we should approach it with something of an initial presumption that that is the case,” *Hastening*, 126. Given his actualistic understanding of the command of God, it would seem unlikely that Barth would presume that the command of God could in any way be mediated thus - attested, yes, but not mediated. Much truer to Barth’s actualistic intention is Biggar’s general acknowledgement that “[A]lthough it is true ... that Barth recognizes the formative impact of the past upon the present, there is no doubt that his emphasis falls heavily upon the openness of the present to the future,” *Hastening*, 136.

<sup>73</sup> I/2, 590.

<sup>74</sup> IV/1, 690. Barth writes that if Scripture fails to be a continuing witness to Jesus Christ, then “there can easily enter what the Church has to say to itself or to the world: the Christian ideal, outlook and ethics, Christianity or the Gospel in one of the complicated or simplified forms in which man has constantly adjusted it to his needs; the content, perhaps, of a good or a bad dogmatics or ethics,” I/2, 690. Consequently Barth notes that respect for the authority of Church confession “has necessarily to



Ecclesial disagreement therefore fundamentally calls for openness in the Church, for the testimony of Scripture itself can only be received when “the members of the Church are willing and ready, in its interpretation and application, to listen to each other.”<sup>75</sup> And the ethical agent is herself called to openness, for as she confesses her own faith and enters into debate with the rest of the Church about its common faith, she enters into a debate in which she “may have to be guided, or even opposed and certainly corrected.”<sup>76</sup> For Barth, this debate is profoundly necessary, for “questions have to be asked and answered in the Church about faith, about the hearing and receiving of the Word of God.”<sup>77</sup>

The Church as ethical context therefore represents an authority which is both prerequisite and fallible. At the heart of this tension is Barth’s statement that “human freedom in the Church has in the limiting function of the Word of God both its foundation and its crisis.”<sup>78</sup> This reflects the actualistic ontology in which the Church is construed to exist only in Jesus Christ: “[E]ven in its human being and action and operation it is from Him and by Him.”<sup>79</sup> In the act of the Church being obedient and open and submissive to the Word of God, it bears a definite authority analogous to the authority of God, and as such deserves the obedience of the ethical agent.

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be conjoined with a basic readiness to envisage a possible alteration [to it],” I/2, 659. Bruce McCormack writes that for the Barth of the 1920’s, “[T]he guidance provided by the tradition is a relative guidance ... [that] can only be employed legitimately where it is employed flexibly and with openness to correction,” in “Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest,” 337, but that nevertheless, “[W]here the Church has not yet received better instruction (so that it might be in a position to revise or even revoke those prior decisions), they remain in force,” in “Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest,” 336. On both points, the Barth of the *Church Dogmatics* is in agreement.

<sup>75</sup> I/2, 696. This stress on human co-operation recalls Barth’s writing on the unity of the Church, where he notes that “the decisive step is that the divided Churches should honestly and seriously try to hear and perhaps hear the voice of the Lord by them and for them, and then try to hear, and perhaps actually hear, the voice of the others,” IV/1, 684. Nigel Biggar notes that in the *Church Dogmatics*, “the ethical role of the Christian Church that receives most direct attention is that of making dialogue with others basic to the process of moral deliberation,” *Hastening*, 127.

<sup>76</sup> I/2, 588. This debate is to be guided by Scripture, for whose effective operation, continuous expression and hearing, and continuous proclamation and fruitfulness the ethical agent assumes responsibility on becoming a member of the community, I/2, 711. Barth asserts that “no member of the Church can remain unconcerned, idle and inactive in face of this duty,” I/2, 714.

<sup>77</sup> I/2, 591. Barth insists that “[N]o one ... can be content at this point to be a mere ‘layman’, to be indolent, to be no more than a passive spectator or reader,” III/4, 498. Instead, common enquiry must be a constant endeavour, I/2, 591, with the goal that “those who take part in it should make a common confession of their faith,” I/2, 592. Nigel Biggar thus notes that where conflict occurs, “[I]t will be conflict for the sake of fellowship and therefore in fellowship,” in *Hastening*, 125.

<sup>78</sup> I/2, 699.

<sup>79</sup> IV/2, 654.



However, because this authority can never be predicated directly of the Church, so the Church lives in constant need both of human openness to discern the true Word of God and of divine grace to become what it is called to be. As a result, the Church has to pray for and rely on the presence and action of Jesus Christ, for it “would always die and perish if He did not speak to it, if it did not hear His voice, summoning it to watch and pray.”<sup>80</sup> Ultimately, it is only in this power of the Holy Spirit, in the history in which the Word of God is heard in Scripture, that the Church “is not left to itself, but is continually touched by saving truth and made alive.”<sup>81</sup>

### *iii) the Church as ethical ‘agent’*

For Barth, the Church is not only the context in which theological ethics is practiced and discussed, but is also itself an ethical agent, albeit, as Reinhard Hütter observes, “only in a qualified and restricted sense.”<sup>82</sup> Barth observes that as the Church is confronted by the command of God, it faces the question whether and to what extent it corresponds in its visible existence to the fact that it is the body of Jesus Christ.<sup>83</sup> Correspondingly, Jüngel argues, “the fundamental ethical question should not be (as with Kant) ‘What should I do?’ but ‘What should we do?’.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> IV/1, 711.

<sup>81</sup> I/2, 691. Paul Lehmann argues similarly when he contends that “the starting point for Christian thinking about ethics is the fact and the nature of the Christian Church,” *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper, 1963), 45, and then almost immediately adds that “*Christian ethics, in other words, is oriented toward revelation and not toward morality*,” *Ethics in a Christian Context*, 45. There is no contradiction here, for Lehmann - like Barth - does not consider the Church to be institutionally or sociologically or liturgically defined but to be actualistically posited as a work of God, *Ethics in a Christian Context*, 72. Mangina correspondingly notes that “what Barth’s ecclesiology lacks is a sense of persistence or *durée*; ... a reluctance to see God’s revelation ‘captured’ in human time ramifies throughout his soteriology,” in “The Stranger as Sacrament,” 333. Mangina laments that Barth “refuses to allow the Spirit’s work to be conditioned or qualified by the ‘given’ nexus of practices in which the church has its identity,” in “The Stranger as Sacrament,” 333, and calls instead for a “concrete pneumatology,” in “Bearing the Marks of Jesus: The Church in the Economy of Salvation in Barth and Hauerwas,” in *SJT* 52.3 (1999), 301. Reinhard Hütter similarly regrets that, for Barth, “the Church’s practices remain ... radically distinguished from the Holy Spirit’s activity,” in “Karl Barth’s ‘Dialectical Catholicity’: *Sic et Non*,” in *MT* 16.2 (2000), 151, a view which acts as something of a refrain throughout his analysis of Barth’s ecclesiology in his *Evangelische Ethik als kirchliches Zeugnis* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993), for example at 47, 55, 63, 91, 92, 104-105. To move in this direction, however, would not only be to revise Barth’s ecclesiology, but also, and crucially, to vitiate the underlying actualistic ontology, which would have severe implications also for his doctrines of election and Christology.

<sup>82</sup> Hütter, *Evangelische Ethik als kirchliches Zeugnis*, 73.

<sup>83</sup> IV/1, 700.

<sup>84</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 321.

In common with the individual ethical agent, Barth writes of the crucial need for openness in the Church in its practice of theological ethics. He argues that if the Church wishes to see Jesus Christ, it is directed and bound to Scripture,<sup>85</sup> for it has to “recognise in the wholly concrete commands and prohibitions once given to the people of God the ordinances and commands given to itself.”<sup>86</sup> However, Barth prescribes in an actualistic way how the Church is to enact this:

[T]he Church is most faithful to its tradition, and realises its unity with the Church of every age, when, linked but not tied by its past, it to-day searches the Scriptures and orientates its life by them as though this had to happen to-day for the first time. And, on the other hand, it sickens and dies when it is enslaved by its past instead of being disciplined by the new beginning which it must always make in the Scriptures.<sup>87</sup>

Barth thus writes that if the Church is “conscious with ultimate fidelity of its faith in its Lord and obedience to Him, it must remain open for new direction and guidance from the point which it has now reached.”<sup>88</sup> Consequently, the Church “has to follow the elucidation which constantly issues from the self-declaration of Jesus Christ, from the content of the Gospel itself.”<sup>89</sup> The decisive activity in the practice of theological ethics in the Church is again prayer, for Barth posits that “[P]rayer is a basic element in the whole action of the whole community.”<sup>90</sup> He writes that “[O]nly the *ecclesia orans* can and will be the *ecclesia efficaciter laborans*, the community which really corresponds to its responsibility.”<sup>91</sup> Even so, Barth cautions that

... never even in part can the Church believe that it has mastered it [the revelation of God], that it has learned what Christ really wants of us in the message of the apostles, what preaching and sacrament ought really to be in our midst.<sup>92</sup>

It is therefore only in a prayerful state of continual attentiveness to the ever-new command of God that the Church can engage in the practice of theological ethics, in which action the Church corresponds to the individual ethical agent in his practice.

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<sup>85</sup> I/2, 583.

<sup>86</sup> II/2, 706.

<sup>87</sup> II/2, 647. Barth writes elsewhere of Scripture that “[O]ur knowledge of its character as the Word of God and therefore of its inspiration will thus consist in our willing approach to the Word of God promised in it; willing to let the new thing happen to us which, if we will hear it, will become the event in our life and in the life of the whole of the Church,” I/2, 527-528.

<sup>88</sup> IV/2, 715.

<sup>89</sup> IV/3, 847. As a result, Barth demands that “in the investigation, establishment and practice of what is right the community has to listen uninterruptedly and continually to Him, to have regard to His control and to respect His direction - yesterday, to-day and to-morrow,” IV/2, 710.

<sup>90</sup> IV/3, 882.

<sup>91</sup> IV/3, 778.

<sup>92</sup> I/2, 228.

## D - the problems of theological ethics

Critiques of Barth's construal of the practice of theological ethics centre on two key issues - the first is that his theological ethics is too abstract, while the second is that his theological ethics does insufficient justice to the role of the Church.

### *i) the question of abstraction*

Barth is convinced that "more than guidance will not be expected from even the most particular ethics."<sup>93</sup> While it was noted previously that Barth might be criticised on internal grounds for offering too much specificity in his ethics, there also exists a critique from a different perspective which argues that Barth's ethics is simply too abstract. This section first introduces the relevant charges of abstraction, then considers the intention of Barth in his theological ethics, and finally draws some tentative conclusions as to the justification of the charges.

#### a) the charge of abstraction

The charge of abstraction has been levelled at three different aspects of Barth's ethics: first, that Barth abstracts from the empirical situation of the ethical agent; second, that Barth abstracts from the practical difficulty of discerning the command of God; and third, that Barth abstracts from the offering of concrete ethical advice.

First, regarding the concrete situation of the individual, Robert Willis suggests that the difficulty with Barth's ethics lies in the fact that

Barth has allowed his view of the *empirical* context within which the event of God's command and man's response occurs to be delimited entirely by the *ontological* context and event of the total movement of God outward from himself in creation, reconciliation, and redemption.<sup>94</sup>

Willis contends that with the understanding of the command of God coming only from its self-interpretation, no political, economic, sociological, or psychological

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<sup>93</sup> III/4, 31.

<sup>94</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 199.

considerations can play a part in Barth's theological ethics.<sup>95</sup> Charles West similarly argues that Barth's doctrine of all-embracing grace leads him "to neglect his responsibility for that difficult empirical analysis of real human relations,"<sup>96</sup> so that his theology, "despite all its exaltation of the concrete, finds it difficult to break through to the concrete."<sup>97</sup> In the same vein, Stanley Hauerwas has criticised Barth for not paying more attention to the actual nature of the human capacity for self-determination, for example, "the nature of action itself, the nature of dispositions, attitudes, and intentions or the concept of practical intelligence."<sup>98</sup>

Second, regarding the perceptibility of the command, Gustafson writes that "[W]hat is not warranted is Barth's confidence in the objectivity of a particular command of God that can be heard, and thus can provide a moral certainty."<sup>99</sup> He comments that "[I]n the end, Barth is as sure that there are no genuine moral dilemmas as are some philosophers."<sup>100</sup> In similar fashion, Willis questions whether the ethical agent ever finds herself in a situation which is "entirely uncluttered and free of ambiguities, so that it is immediately self-evident, without serious moral reflection on our part, what we are to do."<sup>101</sup> He concludes with the question of whether it is "really the case that there is *never* ambiguity about 'the will of God' for a given situation?"<sup>102</sup>

Third, regarding the lack of empirical ethical advice offered by Barth, Stanley Hauerwas writes that he remains "bothered by a peculiar 'abstractness' to Barth's ethics that gives his account of the moral life an aura of unreality."<sup>103</sup> In an analysis of Barth's concept of honour, Hauerwas complains that in

... discussing honour at such a general level, ... Barth is able to have his theological cake and eat it too. It seem to make sense, but I suspect that it does so because we fill up the formal analysis with our own categories without knowing how these categories are

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<sup>95</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 200.

<sup>96</sup> Charles C. West, *Communism and the Theologians* (London: SCM, 1958), 313.

<sup>97</sup> West, *Communism and the Theologians*, 320.

<sup>98</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, 157.

<sup>99</sup> Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, 33.

<sup>100</sup> Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, 33.

<sup>101</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 199.

<sup>102</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 199.

<sup>103</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "On Honour," in *Reckoning with Barth*, ed. Nigel Biggar (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988), 149.

to be theologically controlled.<sup>104</sup>

What is missing, Hauerwas concludes, is the sort of material analysis of ethical concepts that is offered by writers of fiction: for example, by Trollope, who “offers the kind of concrete account of honour that Barth’s method seems to prevent.”<sup>105</sup> Moreover, Joseph L. Mangina posits that Barth is less helpful in “showing how the great passion, the eschatological zeal for God, is modulated in relation to the little passions of creaturely existence.”<sup>106</sup> Finally, Biggar suggests, in related but altogether more questionable fashion, that “a novel by Trollope would be more useful in the moral education of the young than selections from the *Church Dogmatics*.”<sup>107</sup>

#### b) the intention of abstraction

In examining these charges of abstraction with reference to Barth’s theological ethics, it is important once again to consider the intentions of Barth in his ethics.

The first charge - that Barth neglects the empirical situation in which the command of God is received - is irrefutable in one sense, in that Barth does not labour as a priority to sketch out the discrete political, economic, sociological, or psychological circumstances in which the command of God might be received. However, this does *not* imply that these circumstances have no bearing at all on the command of God itself. At the very centre of Barth’s actualistic understanding of the command of God is precisely its uniqueness and contextuality: the fact that it meets a concrete individual at a concrete time in a concrete place, with attendant particularities in political, economic, sociological and psychological circumstance. Barth writes of this in terms of individual human vocation, that which encompasses “the whole of the particularity, limitation and restriction in which every man meets the divine call and command.”<sup>108</sup> He affirms that “[S]ince he is this man and not another, the command

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<sup>104</sup> Hauerwas, “On Honour,” 155.

<sup>105</sup> Hauerwas, “On Honour,” 167.

<sup>106</sup> Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 191.

<sup>107</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 139. This claim is questionable because it hides a contestable pedagogical claim - that exemplary teaching in moral education is better than propositional teaching - under the rhetorical guise of an axiom of universal applicability.

<sup>108</sup> III/4, 599. Thus, as Werpehowski notes, the concept of vocation is central in understand how the command engages with everyday situations, “Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth,”

of God concerns him in this way and not another.”<sup>109</sup> And therefore Barth observes that theological ethics follows the command of God “into the distinctive lowlands of real human action and therefore ... into the events in which this particular man realises this particular condition and possibility and therefore himself.”<sup>110</sup> It is therefore a sign of how seriously Barth takes the actual complexity of the situation of the ethical agent that he does not attempt to trivialise it by perfunctory descriptive analysis. Hence, as Johnson notes, “Barth is a radically contextual ethicist.”<sup>111</sup> Within this contextual moral ontology, it is impossible to separate, as Willis wishes, “the context of ‘divine ethics’ and ... the empirical framework where the stuff of *human* decision and action must be wrestled with.”<sup>112</sup> It is rather the case that while Barth is reluctant to detail the different conceivable political, economic, sociological, or psychological contexts in which the command might be heard, he is nevertheless adamant that the command of God itself will always take them fully into account.

The second charge - that the command of God is always there to be heard and is ambiguous - is more difficult to assess. In clear opposition to Gustafson and Willis, Barth is confident that “in the very fact that we ask we will receive the knowledge of God’s command.”<sup>113</sup> It is the Holy Spirit, according to Barth, who “actually reveals and makes known and imparts and writes on our heart and conscience the will of God.”<sup>114</sup> And therefore Barth posits that “[T]he obscurity of God’s will in a particular case always arises on man’s side, not on God’s.”<sup>115</sup> Ultimately, he concludes that

[T]he problem of distinguishing the command of God from other commands narrows down accordingly to that of distinguishing Jesus Christ from all other lords and ultimately and decisively from the lord that each of us would like to be over himself.<sup>116</sup>

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305-306. Barth thus pre-empts the apparently novel proposal of Biggar that “a divine command should be understood, in the end, in terms of personal vocation,” *Hastening*, 44.

<sup>109</sup> III/4, 597. Barth attempts nothing more than to sketch out possible categories contextualising the vocation of a particular ethical agent: her age, III/4, 607, her situation in history, III/4, 618, her personal aptitude, III/4, 623, and her sphere of everyday life, III/4, 630.

<sup>110</sup> III/4, 6.

<sup>111</sup> Johnson, *The Mystery of God*, 161.

<sup>112</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 443.

<sup>113</sup> II/2, 648.

<sup>114</sup> IV/2, 372. Barth asserts that “[I]ntercourse between God and man does not cease in the work of the Holy Spirit,” IV/4, 28. Thus, as Biggar notes, Barth’s ethics “is characterized by a remarkable confidence in, and focus upon, the activity of the Holy Spirit,” *Hastening*, 164.

<sup>115</sup> III/4, 12.

<sup>116</sup> II/2, 608.



This matter is not easily settled, whether theoretically or phenomenologically. Perhaps the most sympathetic way of understanding the command in this context is simply to note once again the importance of the covenant in Barth's theological ethics. Biggar writes in this respect of moral decisions as "a response to a definite vocation to play a particular part in this moment of the redemptive history of the covenant between God and humankind."<sup>117</sup> Ethical reflection on the 'formed' reference of this history underlying the command may guide the ethical agent and assist her to hear the command of God more clearly and less ambiguously.

The third charge - that Barth fails to offer sufficiently empirical advice - is more easily analysed. It is true that throughout his ethics, as Biggar notes, Barth "never provides illustrative stories or cases,"<sup>118</sup> and it therefore seems correct for Stuart McLean to contend that Barth was "less concerned with the empirical analysis."<sup>119</sup> It can only be said at this point that it is never Barth's intention to offer either case studies or empirical analysis in his ethics. By contrast, he writes that "[W]hat begins with the human self cannot end with knowledge of God and of His command."<sup>120</sup>

### c) Barth and abstraction

The charges of abstraction against Barth's theological ethics emerge partly as a result of Barth's methodological view that to consider the Christian life independently of God is a profoundly dubious undertaking. Barth writes that when ethics is separated from dogmatics in this way, "there regularly occurs a change of focus, a fatal interchange of the subjects God and man."<sup>121</sup> Biggar criticises this principle, arguing that the appropriate response to such a belief should instead be

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<sup>117</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 44.

<sup>118</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 140.

<sup>119</sup> McLean, *Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth*, 65. McLean also argues of Barth that "his approach had greater potential for empirical analysis than he either developed or realized," *Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth*, 65, and Willis suggests that "Barth has missed opportunities provided by his own theology for a more sustained engagement with the empirical dimensions of the ethical context," *Ethics*, 385. Yet both would be incorrect if such empirical work were in any way to abstract from the ethical agent as a creature of the covenant in an ongoing living encounter and relationship with God in Jesus Christ. And indeed this seems to be exactly what Willis desires to do when he contends that with Barth's Christological approach, "the subtlety and complexity of these contexts tend to be reduced," *Ethics*, 383-384.

<sup>120</sup> II/2, 541.

<sup>121</sup> I/2, 790.



... to bracket any discrete description of the moral shape of the Christian life with severe reminders that such a description has been abstracted from its primary religious substance - the dynamic relationship of the Christian subject to God in Christ.<sup>122</sup>

However, it is not clear that this would be a tenable procedure for Barth. Werpehowski correctly notes that for Barth, "any theological ethical account ... cannot involve the 'acceptance of independent principles which compromise the theonomy of human existence and action'."<sup>123</sup> The whole possibility of theological ethics for Barth rests upon the 'formed' reference, and it is only because of that reference that we can, in Werpehowski's words, "apprehend through a *theonomous* understanding and judgment that command of the gracious God which applies to our situation."<sup>124</sup> Willis summarises this accurately, albeit somewhat disapprovingly, when he notes that "[F]or Barth, a contextual or situational ethics is necessitated on theological rather than empirical grounds."<sup>125</sup> It is difficult to see what would be left of the moral shape of the Christian life for Barth if one were to follow Biggar's suggestion and abstract it from its noetic and ontic basis in Jesus Christ.<sup>126</sup>

A further methodological reason for Barth's abstractions may rest in his division of labour in the task of theological ethics. In a short but intriguing passage, Barth postulates that there could be a legitimate ethics alongside theological ethics called 'Christian ethics', which "would open up the whole problem of the uncertain and

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<sup>122</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 141. Biggar comments that Barth "never gives the impression of having said anything less than needed to be said," *Hastening*, 140, but perhaps it would be fairer to comment that Barth never gives the impression of having said anything less than *could* be said, given his actualistic understanding of the command of God.

<sup>123</sup> Werpehowski, "Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth," 301, quoting II/2, 527.

<sup>124</sup> Werpehowski, "Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth," 307-308. Such an understanding does not preclude a wise and insightful understanding of the Christian life: Werpehowski notes elsewhere that "[O]ne need not agree with all of Barth's specific analysis to appreciate the depth of these efforts at critically describing convictions, relations, virtues, and emotions constitutive of Christian living," in "Hearing the Divine Command," 68. This view sits uneasily with John McDowell's view that "Barth's theology appears resistant ... to an incorporation of the differentiated voices of particular concrete human beings," *Hope in Barth's Eschatology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 224. Given the actualistic way in which Barth construes the command of God, it is clear that it is precisely the particular and the concrete with which Barth is concerned; the question is whether such specificity can be reached in a description of theological ethics without falling victim to precisely the kind of (over-)generalisation which McDowell is also keen to avoid. Matheny offers a useful perspective here, commenting that "Barth's intent is to open up dogmatics to insights into our social reality, but not for the purpose of moral arbitration based on moral experience. Moral reflection has another reference," *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 30 n.43.

<sup>125</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 385.

<sup>126</sup> *TCL*, 9.

questionable nature of human life and conduct.”<sup>127</sup> Barth contends that such ethics *might* be found in the works of Dickens, Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy; in certain social and political conceptions; or in the studies of the philosophical moralists.<sup>128</sup> This kind of ethics would have the same starting-point, basis and aim as theological ethics,<sup>129</sup> and would similarly be determined by a prior knowledge of the Word of God.<sup>130</sup> However, it would not formally investigate these foundational principles and thus be distinct from theological ethics, and thus not be encountered in academic work.<sup>131</sup> The way would thus be open for a more practical and less academic presentation of ethics that was explicitly not attempted by Barth, but that may nevertheless be not only but perhaps even necessary.<sup>132</sup>

It is clear that Barth’s ethics leaves him open to and, in at least one sense, guilty of the charge of abstraction. The actualistic construal of the command of God means that for Barth, “there cannot really be any external statutes by which Christian obedience may ever be defined or determined absolutely.”<sup>133</sup> His actualistic ontology thus precludes precise specification of the empirical situation or empirical obedience of the ethical agent in an academic work of theological ethics. Nevertheless, Barth’s continuous and active involvement in socio-political affairs in his own life, his affirmation of ‘prophetic casuistry’ and ‘Christian ethics’, and his view of the importance of the proclamation and witness of the Church all indicate that his own practice of theological ethics most certainly did not rest at abstraction.

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<sup>127</sup> II/2, 541.

<sup>128</sup> II/2, 542.

<sup>129</sup> II/2, 542.

<sup>130</sup> II/2, 541.

<sup>131</sup> II/2, 542. Biggar suggests a measure of ambiguity in Barth’s intention at this point, asserting that in his special ethics, Barth “was not always careful to observe the division of labour,” *Hastening*, 163. This criticism has already been assessed in the previous chapter.

<sup>132</sup> A key example of this might be what Barth refers to as “practical casuistry (*praktische Kasuistik*)” or “active casuistry (*eine Kasuistik im Ereignis*), the casuistry of the prophetic *ethos*,” III/4, 9, *KD* III/4, 8. The German original captures the actualistic sense of this task for Barth, a sense which is lost in translation. In the event of ‘practical casuistry’, “the universal command of God concentrated into a concrete and particular form will direct this man to interfere and others to accept this interference,” III/4, 9. For the ‘prophet’, therefore, this endeavour consists in understanding the command of God in a particular way, in deciding upon a corresponding action, and in summoning others to a corresponding decision, III/4, 9. A possible archetype for this ‘practical casuistry’ is visible in Barth’s reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan, I/2, 416–421, while the importance of the prophetic ministry of the Church is definitively affirmed by Barth, IV/3, 895–898.

<sup>133</sup> III/3, 255.

ii) the question of ecclesiology

Barth gives the Church a highly prominent role in his view of the practice of theological ethics. He insists first that the question of ethics must be “[W]hat ought we to do? and not, what ought *I* to do?,”<sup>134</sup> and second that this reference is specifically to those who are in Jesus Christ, to those who “belong to Him as a member of His body.”<sup>135</sup> Willis accordingly writes of Barth’s view of “the centrality of the community of God as the place at which God’s action is recognized and accepted, and so witnessed to and proclaimed.”<sup>136</sup> However, some theologians remain unsatisfied with the role which Barth accords the Church in this practice. Foremost among these critics is Stanley Hauerwas, who argues that “Barth simply fails to provide any conceptual or empirical account of how honour requires the existence of ... a community.”<sup>137</sup> He explains that “[W]hat we need to know is how honour in this or that context may or may not be appropriate to the service to which we are called as Christians.”<sup>138</sup> Colin Gunton similarly complains that Barth’s analysis of human character and action being the product of a process of moral formation “is philosophically unsophisticated, and therefore bears a rather abstract character.”<sup>139</sup>

To assess this critique, this section examines Barth’s ecclesiology first in its circumscription, and second in its actualism, before drawing some conclusions as to its role in his theological ethics.

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<sup>134</sup> II/2, 655.

<sup>135</sup> II/2, 656. Lovin therefore correctly notes that, in respect of Barth, “[T]he church is the true object of the command of God and the true locus of obedience,” *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 103. George Hunsinger appropriately recognises at this point that “[T]he primacy of the community, therefore, does not exclude but includes the significance of the individual as a locus of the Spirit’s communal work,” in “Karl Barth’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 191.

<sup>136</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 180.

<sup>137</sup> Hauerwas, “On Honour,” 169.

<sup>138</sup> Hauerwas, “On Honour,” 155. Hauerwas laments that in Barth there is no description of “the kind of societal ethos, the concrete community, that is capable of producing a Wortle [an honourable character],” in “On Honour,” 168. For Hauerwas, what Barth fails to elucidate “is where such honesty comes and how it is sustained ... [which] is not a ‘psychological or biographical’ question, but rather a question of how Christian ethics is done,” in “On Honour,” 168. He concludes with some exasperation, “[W]hy Barth overlooked or failed to emphasize the importance of the kind of community that makes honour possible, I do not know,” in “On Honour,” 169.

<sup>139</sup> Gunton, “The triune God and the freedom of the creature,” 58. John Webster observes that some will find Barth’s account of the corporate dimensions of Christian belief and behaviour “to be decidedly thin,” *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 170.

a) circumscribed ecclesiology

While the Church is crucially important in the practice of theological ethics for Barth, its importance is highly circumscribed by its very human nature. As James Buckley notes, for Barth the church is “a creaturely community and thus subject to the claims Barth makes about being a creature in God’s cosmos.”<sup>140</sup> On the one hand, then, the Church cannot make any pretence to be an infallible repository of divine knowledge, whether ethical, dogmatic, or otherwise. At every time and in every place, the freedom of the Word of God in Scripture remains beyond the auspices of ecclesial control.<sup>141</sup> And on the other hand, the Church cannot pretend to be the divinely-appointed means for the mediation of grace, sacramental or otherwise. For all times and for all places, the death of Jesus Christ is “the one *mysterium*, the one sacrament, and the one existential fact before and beside and after which there is no room for any other of the same rank.”<sup>142</sup> It is no surprise, then, that John Webster writes of Barth’s “negative ecclesiology.”<sup>143</sup>

However, despite the creatureliness of the Church, the ethical agent does not identify herself with the decision made about her in the Word of God without the Church but only “as a member of the body of Christ and therefore as a member of the Church.”<sup>144</sup> The fulfilment of the covenant represents a new determination of the being of the individual such that he

... is snatched from the depth of his guilt and the misery of his consequent isolation from his fellow-man and exalted to life in fellowship with Jesus Christ as his Saviour and therefore to fellowship with his fellow-man.<sup>145</sup>

Under this new determination, the ethical agent stands under a new direction to seek

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<sup>140</sup> James J. Buckley, “Community, baptism, and Lord’s Supper,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 202.

<sup>141</sup> I/2, 557.

<sup>142</sup> IV/1, 296.

<sup>143</sup> Webster, *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 166. Webster observes that much of the protest against Barth on this point may lie in the fact that “a certain style of ecumenical theology has elided some of the distinctions which Barth believed to be fundamentally necessary for a consistent exposition of the gospel: distinctions between *opus dei* and *opus hominem*, between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit, between the divine act of salvation and the ecclesial and religious world in which its benefits are appropriated,” *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 166.

<sup>144</sup> I/2, 703.

<sup>145</sup> III/2, 275.

“the assembling of the community which God has commissioned to hear and proclaim the witness concerning Himself.”<sup>146</sup> As it worships in this assembly, the Church “becomes a concrete event at a specific time and place.”<sup>147</sup> Lovin notes correspondingly that for Barth, “[T]he story of faith is not a series of stories about isolated individuals ... [but] the account of a community whom God summons to a continuing covenant partnership.”<sup>148</sup> And therefore the practice of theological ethics, even as it is commanded of the individual, will have its primary determination as a corporate exercise of the Church.

One of the striking features of Barth’s ‘negative’ ecclesiology is that it ultimately frees the Church to be the true Church. He relocates the Church to an actualistic point that is unencumbered by the burdens of static dogmatic infallibility or automatic sacramental mediation. Barth observes critically that “[T]he Church is always the world as well.”<sup>149</sup> And therefore the Church can be bold only with

... the proviso of humility, i.e., that it has still to receive better instruction, that it will achieve a fuller obedience in the future, and that it will have to revise, not just tomorrow, but even to-day the work it did yesterday; but also the proviso of freedom, i.e., that it has the power to do this.<sup>150</sup>

Barth consequently argues that “[W]e will not be obedient to the Church but to the Word of God, and therefore in the true sense to the Church.”<sup>151</sup> In this new position, the Church is free to be truly human, in a ministry of witness which of itself is neither divine nor semi-divine, but unequivocally human.<sup>152</sup> Nor is this determination and circumscription to be viewed negatively or pessimistically, for Barth writes that it is precisely within this divine limitation that the individual, and by extension, the Church, “finds himself fully affirmed and taken seriously by God.”<sup>153</sup>

#### b) actualistic ecclesiology

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<sup>146</sup> III/4, 70.

<sup>147</sup> IV/2, 639.

<sup>148</sup> Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 102-103.

<sup>149</sup> II/1, 144.

<sup>150</sup> IV/2, 715-716.

<sup>151</sup> I/2, 475.

<sup>152</sup> IV/3, 839.

<sup>153</sup> III/4, 567. Busch notes that for Barth, “[T]he church can only point beyond itself to what is promised to us and to all; otherwise it becomes an enterprise that peddles foolishness to the people or indulges covertly in false magic,” *The Great Passion*, 251.



If Barth's 'negative' ecclesiology frees the Church to be the true Church, then it also frees God to be truly God. He writes that ecclesiology is a matter of "the history of the activity of Jesus, of the Lord who has come already, and will come again, but who is alive to-day; of the activity of this Lord to and with His people."<sup>154</sup> Hence Webster writes of Barth's hostility to "the way in which the shaping influence of the *ecclesia* may eclipse the activity of God."<sup>155</sup> Far from eclipsing the activity of God, it is Barth's view that the Church merely reflects it.

At the heart of this actualism in ecclesiology lies a profound confidence that God is truly active in the Church. Barth asks demanding and critically of the community

[I]s there any *hic et nunc* in which it [the community] may maintain with a good conscience that it cannot hear the living Word of its living Lord spoken to this *hic et nunc*? ... Has it long since come to regard it as fanaticism to think that as His *viva vox* it is not an abstract, static and non-binding, but a supremely concrete, dynamic and binding disclosure concerning God, the world and man, that it is always in every specific time and situation the decisive Word to the world, and that it must be attested by the community as such?<sup>156</sup>

Indeed, Barth warns that the falsification of the Gospel "commences, with all the ineluctable consequences, when the community ceases to hear it afresh each new day."<sup>157</sup> As the Word of God that the community has to attest encounters the Church as a new and concrete reality each day in the covenant of grace, it does so as both Gospel and Law. As a result, Lovin notes, the Church "as the community of those attentive to the Word of God and mindful of their history as God's covenant people becomes the important locus for moral discernment."<sup>158</sup> It is only within the covenant of grace that this Word of God can be truly heard, that this history can truly unfold, and that this discernment can truly occur. The genuine practice of theological ethics, like the true Church, would not exist without this free and gracious and continual activity of God in the community.

Beyond the activity of God in the Church, Barth is equally confident that God is

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<sup>154</sup> IV/2, 623.

<sup>155</sup> Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 170 n.91.

<sup>156</sup> IV/3, 815.

<sup>157</sup> IV/3, 822.

<sup>158</sup> Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 12.

active in the rest of creation. He declares that the Word of God “is not spoken only to individuals or the community but to the world.”<sup>159</sup> This ontic determination of creation means for Barth that it is only natural that the creation also “should be taken up and used in the service of His Word, and given a part in its work.”<sup>160</sup> In the freedom of God, that service may consist in creation acting to “speak and tell of what God says, and therefore speak as from God Himself, praising and glorifying Him.”<sup>161</sup> This position clearly has profound implications for the practice of theological ethics, for Barth acknowledges that to the shame of the Church, the will of God “has often been better fulfilled outside the Church than in it.”<sup>162</sup> By the grace of God, then, these lights of life and words of God in the wider creation may also contribute constructively to the practice of theological ethics in the Church.

### c) theological ethics and ecclesiology

With this review of the circumscribed and actualistic dimensions of Barth’s ecclesiology in mind, it is now possible to offer a response to those who have criticised its role in his theological ethics.

First, it is true that Barth does not provide a straightforward conceptual or empirical account of how a virtue such as honour requires the existence of a community. However, while recognising this, it is important to realise that for Barth, the causality actually - and actualistically - works in the opposite direction. As the Church is called into existence by the grace of God, it witnesses to the command of God, and the command of God may require a certain manner of behaviour from the members of the Church. In a mediate sense, then, it is the community which requires the existence of a particular mode of behaviour, and not the other way round. Whether any particular construal or example of virtue will be appropriate to the service to which Christians are called - another of Hauerwas’ concerns - is a matter that can only be determined in the concrete case of the obedience or disobedience of an ethical agent in encounter with the command of God. For Barth, it seems that the

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<sup>159</sup> IV/3, 154.

<sup>160</sup> IV/3, 156.

<sup>161</sup> IV/3, 164.

<sup>162</sup> II/2, 569.



relationship in which obedience and moral formation are primarily located is the relationship between the ethical agent and the living God within the context of the Church and not the relationship between her and the Church.

Second, it is true that Barth does not delineate in any detail the kind of community which can produce virtuous individuals. However, it is essential to recall what being a virtuous individual might mean for Barth in the first place. As suggested above, the key work in the practice of theological ethics is that of remaining open to the command of God. And in this connection, Biggar perceptively writes that for Barth, “the formation of good character ... consists essentially in our *repeated obedience* to the command of God’s grace.”<sup>163</sup> In view of Barth’s actualistic conception of God and the covenant relationship between God and humanity, then, virtuous individuals are not produced by a community, but by the faithful and obedient response to the command of God of the ethical agent within the community. And thus, as Webster notes, “[F]or Barth, any notion of a *sensus communis moralis* is nothing other than an attempt to bracket the credo.”<sup>164</sup> When Biggar contends, then, that one of the ethical roles of the Church “is that of comprising a school for the formation of moral character,”<sup>165</sup> this can only be true for Barth in a highly qualified sense. There is for Barth no unambiguous sense of ethical certainty resident in the community, nor is there any ontologically infused ethical virtue to be imparted to the ethical agent by the Church - only a creaturely habit of community discipline in which she must always beginning again at the beginning.

Yet precisely this creaturely discipline of openness can and must be encouraged by the community. It is the Church in which the discipline of being open is cultivated; in which the Word of God in Scripture is read; in which the invocation of God in prayer is practised. And it is the Church which has to offer indication and guidance on ethical issues in its ethical reflection, based on the ‘formed’ reference to the ethical event attested in Scripture. In all the provisionality and fallibility of its practice of theological ethics, the Church cannot keep silent. Rather, Barth writes, while the

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<sup>163</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 138.

<sup>164</sup> Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, 157.

<sup>165</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 127.

community has to ask for and be open to divine instruction, it “has also in the true sense to answer: to answer in order to ask again; but genuinely to answer; to say something and not be silent.”<sup>166</sup>

As the true Church is actualised in these diverse ways, it seems unfair to suggest with Hauerwas that Barth overlooks the importance of the community in moral matters. However, Barth has certainly radically relativised the importance of the community with a view to prioritising both the transcendence of God and the living relationship of God with the Church as a whole and with the ethical agent in particular. Precisely in its continual dependence on the grace of God, the Church cannot arrogate to itself the role of moral teacher or former of moral character without always insisting that it is such only in a relative and indirect manner. The consequent lack of concretion that Hauerwas finds so problematic is, for Barth, ultimately unavoidable.

## **E - summary**

The practice of theological ethics advocated in the *Church Dogmatics* highlights above all the theological priority of the command of God and the need for the ethical agent and the Church to be correspondingly open to its claim. In this actualistic construal of the practice of theological ethics, Barth is thus insistent that the Spirit tells the Church “that the content of the present day can only be that of the first day; that it can consist only in a steadfast and responsible moving forward from this beginning.”<sup>167</sup> While Scripture and the Church clearly have important and indeed indispensable roles to play in this practice, their importance remains circumscribed by the freedom of the action of God in the event of ethical encounter. This scriptural and ecclesiological restraint is grounded in an actualistic ontology which also renders the sort of precise and detailed ethical expositions and judgements desired in most studies of theological ethics highly problematic. Ultimately, however, the more important consideration for Barth is that the practice of theological ethics remain open to and correspond with its object - the command of the living God.

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<sup>166</sup> IV/2, 713. Barth notes that the community must be ready and willing for new answers: “[T]hey must be the answers of attention and obedience. But they must be definite answers,” IV/2, 711.

<sup>167</sup> IV/2, 568.

## **Section Two -**

### **Ontic Aspects of Ethical Agency**



## **§5 The Ethical Agent**

... we belonged to Him before we existed and will always belong to Him ... - Barth<sup>1</sup>

This chapter turns from noetic matters and the discipline of theological ethics to the ontic matter of the ethical agent herself. Barth considers that the human individual is “wholly determined and created in order that God should speak with him and that he should speak and answer.”<sup>2</sup> As God gives Godself to be known in the command of God, then, the ethical agent is made responsible.<sup>3</sup> This chapter examines how this ethical agent is construed in the *Church Dogmatics* in three main sections. The first section considers how she stands in analogy to Jesus Christ. The second section examines her in her distinction from Jesus Christ. The third section attends to some of the criticisms of this construal of the ethical agent.

### **A - the ethical agent in relation to Jesus Christ**

If the ethical agent is to arrive at a true knowledge of humanity, then Barth believes that this knowledge must be revealed to her by the Word of God: “[W]ho and what man is, is no less specifically and emphatically declared by the Word of God than who and what God is.”<sup>4</sup> Barth therefore grounds his theological anthropology

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<sup>1</sup> II/2, 632-633.

<sup>2</sup> III/2, 17.

<sup>3</sup> II/2, 548.

<sup>4</sup> III/2, 13. Barth writes that “a knowledge of man which is non-theological but genuine is not only possible but basically justified and necessary even from the standpoint of theological anthropology. ... It cannot, of course, lead us to the knowledge of real man. But it may proceed from or presuppose a knowledge of real man. ... Theological anthropology is prepared to welcome all such general knowledge of man,” III/2, 202. In this way, suggests J. Gibbs, Barth’s anthropology *itself* presupposes the (albeit subordinate) importance of “the phenomenological description of man and/or direct witness of Scripture to man,” in “A Secondary Point of Reference in Barth’s Anthropology,” in *SJT* 16 (1963), 134. Barth himself writes that genuine Christianity “is not merely theoretical but living wisdom ..., it unavoidably carries with it a little knowledge of life,” III/2, 290. Indeed, Lienemann argues that attention to Barth’s fundamental orientation to the reality of God “does not exclude but in turn necessarily includes ... an appropriate regard for the research and insights of the humanities and natural sciences,” in “Das Gebot Gottes als ‘Ereignis’,” 158. Konrad Stock observes, however, that in terms of anthropology at least, Barth himself “did not venture to avail himself of the scope and fruitfulness of his approach,” in “Die Funktion anthropologischen Wissens in theologischem Denken - am Beispiel Karl Barths,” in *EvTh* 34 (1974), 532. Nevertheless such views clearly temper Macken’s claim that Barth “tried to derive all significant statements about human nature and worldly reality

squarely on Christology.<sup>5</sup> The way in which Barth proceeds is by way of analogy - from Jesus Christ and to humanity. In what follows, the first section considers the way in which Barth uses analogy in his theological anthropology, while the second section identifies some features of the resultant theological anthropology.

*i) the use of analogy in theological anthropology*

Barth asserts that his adoption of the concept of analogy is not “a systematic but an exegetical decision.”<sup>6</sup> He writes that

[E]verywhere analogies have their proper place where it is a matter of a consideration and understanding of the covenant as it was willed in God’s eternal counsel and fulfilled in time in the incarnation of His Word.<sup>7</sup>

Thus Jüngel observes that the analogies which are encountered throughout Barth’s anthropology “are not to be understood as chance similarities that a divinatory imagination thinks it has to perceive.”<sup>8</sup> Barth is careful to emphasise that “[W]e possess no analogy on the basis of which the nature and being of God as the Lord can be accessible to us.”<sup>9</sup> Hence he posits that “the accessibility of the nature and being of God as Lord, Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer is not constituted by any analogy which we can contribute but only by God Himself.”<sup>10</sup> In condemning the concept of the *analogia entis*, Barth asks:

[I]f there is a real analogy between God and man ... what other analogy can it be than the analogy of being which is posited and created by the work and action of God Himself, the analogy which has its actuality from God and from God alone, and

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from statements about Jesus Christ,” *Autonomy*, 171.

<sup>5</sup> III/2, 44. Indeed, Barth argues that “[A]nthropological and ecclesiological assertions arise only as they are borrowed from Christology,” II/1, 148-149. Given this Christological foundation, he notes that “the sovereignty in which man claims to know himself is renounced, or rather ... regarded as relative rather than absolute,” III/2, 122. Thus Barth posits that “there is no way from autonomous human self-understanding to awareness of the free action of this transcendent God and therefore to the reality of man,” III/2, 124.

<sup>6</sup> II/1, 227. Barth notes that “the object itself - God’s truth in His revelation as the basis of the veracity of our knowledge of God - does not leave us any option but to resort to this concept,” II/1, 225. There is no other option, because “in God’s revelation both His veiling and His unveiling are true,” II/1, 236.

<sup>7</sup> IV/2, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 212. George Hunsinger writes that for Barth, which metaphors and concepts to use in theology was “largely obligatory, scripturally based and secured with the corresponding confidence,” in “Beyond Literalism and Expressivism,” *MT* 3 (1987), 215. His decision to interpret Scripture analogically depended for Hunsinger “not on general considerations but on his reading of the texts as a modern human being within the community of faith,” in “Beyond Literalism and Expressivism,” 218.

<sup>9</sup> II/1, 75.

<sup>10</sup> II/1, 79.

therefore in faith and in faith alone? How can we assert any other analogy ... ?<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, he concludes that “in the doctrine of God, in the doctrine of the knowledge of God by Jesus Christ, we must think and speak and argue from the Word of God and not from elsewhere.”<sup>12</sup>

For Barth, then, the ground of all analogy in theology is Jesus Christ. He writes:

[I]n Jesus Christ Himself ... we have to do with the eternal basis and temporal fulfilment of the covenant and therefore with the ground and basis of all the natural and historical relationships in which the covenant is reflected as the basic relationship between God and man, God and the world, and in which it has therefore its analogies.<sup>13</sup>

As the Subject and the Object of the eternal divine decision of election, Jesus Christ is the basis of all analogies within the covenant of grace, for the humanity of Jesus, Barth writes, is “the repetition and reflection of God Himself ... the image of God, the *imago Dei*.”<sup>14</sup> The human existence of Jesus Christ is construed by Barth in an entirely actualistic fashion, for he asserts that “[I]t is in the humanity, the saving work of Jesus Christ that the connexion between God and man is brought before us,”<sup>15</sup> and indeed it is in this work alone that “it takes place and is realised.”<sup>16</sup> It is at the decisive apex of this actualistic analogy that “Jesus is the image and reflection of

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<sup>11</sup> II/1, 83.

<sup>12</sup> II/1, 242. Barth therefore declares that “we shall ask them [Roman Catholicism] whether their doctrine of the *analogia entis* has any claim at all to justification as a decision demanded by Holy Scripture and how far it can be justified by this source,” II/1, 243. As Alan Torrance notes, a properly defined concept of the *analogia entis* might not fall victim to Barth’s critique, *Persons in Communion*, 185–187, and indeed Barth himself approvingly refers to Gottlieb Söhngen’s interpretation of the *analogia entis*, II/1, 81–82. However, it is far too simplistic to suggest with Jung Young Lee that after III/1, Barth “holds no longer the view that an *analogia relationis* is in contrast with an *analogia entis*,” in “Karl Barth’s Use of Analogy in his Church Dogmatics,” *SJT* 22 (1969), 132.

<sup>13</sup> IV/2, 58. Barth writes that “the true and original correspondence and similarity ... [is] the fact that the man Jesus in His being for man repeats and reflects the inner being or essence of God,” III/2, 219. In the incarnation, God “lives in the repetition and confirmation of what He is in Himself,” IV/2, 346. As Paul Molnar notes, therefore, “what Barth was trying to avoid in his rejection of the *analogia entis* was any attempt to understand God which bypassed Jesus Christ as the *only* possible starting point,” *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 58.

<sup>14</sup> III/2, 219. Barth posits that “[I]n our image’ means to be created as a being which has its ground and possibility in the fact that in ‘us,’ i.e., in God’s own sphere and being, there exists a divine and thus self-grounded prototype to which this being can correspond,” III/1, 183. In Christological terms, then, Barth writes of Jesus Christ that “His humanity is in the closest correspondence with His divinity ... [and] His divinity has its correspondence and image in the humanity in which it is mirrored,” III/2, 216. And therefore the human existence of Jesus Christ exists analogously to the mode of existence of God, IV/2, 166. For Barth, there is revealed in Jesus Christ “the human image with which Adam was created to correspond and could no longer do so when he sinned, when he became ethical man. This human image is at the same time God’s own image,” II/2, 517.

<sup>15</sup> III/2, 220, emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> III/2, 220.



the divine Yes to man and his cosmos.”<sup>17</sup>

At this point, there are two potential dangers which should not be overlooked. The first danger is that the likeness in this analogy be over-stated to the detriment of the account of the true humanity of Jesus Christ. In this connection, Trevor Hart suggests in respect of Barth that

[H]is fear of subordinationist or adoptionist trends, which would effectively sever the revelatory and trinitarian relation between Jesus and God, weighed more heavily more often than the need for a christologically balanced account of Jesus as a man who received God’s Word and responded to it in faith and obedience.<sup>18</sup>

Bruce McCormack correspondingly argues that the only safeguard against such an Apollinarian leaning “is to understand the humanity of Jesus as doing the work it does *humanly*, that is, doing it as we would have to do it were we in a position to do so.”<sup>19</sup> However, Barth himself is well aware of this danger, and expresses firmly that Jesus Christ:

... does His work in pure and total divinity, in the essence which was and is and will be that of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. *But* He does not do it only in this. He does it also in His human essence. And He does it in pure and total humanity, in the essence which is that of all other men. ... The One who acts and speaks is One.<sup>20</sup>

David H. Kelsey thus notes with reference to Barth that “Jesus’ miracles are the human acts (not divine acts only!) that enact the presence of the kingdom and summon men to faith in the God of the kingdom.”<sup>21</sup> The second and opposing danger would be that the unlikeness in this analogy be over-stated to the detriment of the

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<sup>17</sup> IV/2, 180. It is the grounding of the analogical relation in this divine speech-act that differentiates the analogy in question decisively from the *analogia entis*. Lee thus seems misguided in arguing that Barth’s “struggle against *analogia entis* is fundamentally his struggle against the static ontology,” in “Karl Barth’s Use of Analogy,” 147. Rather, as Paul Molnar notes, it is the fact that, for Barth, “there is *no* analogy which is true in itself,” in “The Function of the Immanent Trinity in the Theology of Karl Barth: Implications for Today,” in *SJT* 42 (1989), 375. Only in the arena of grace, then, is it true that, as Jüngel argues, “[T]he humanity of Jesus is the ontic and noetic ground of all analogies,” *Barth-Studien*, 212.

<sup>18</sup> Hart, “Revelation,” 55-56.

<sup>19</sup> McCormack, “The Ontological Presuppositions of Barth’s Doctrine of the Atonement,” 353. McCormack explains that this would mean “doing his miraculous works and living his life of sinless obedience, not as a consequence of the direct influence of the Logos within, but in unbroken dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit,” in “Barth’s Doctrine of the Atonement,” 353. And indeed, Barth explicitly finds in this pneumatological connection the distinction between Jesus and other individuals: Jesus is the One “upon whom the Spirit not only descends intermittently and partially but on whom He rests, who does not merely live from the Spirit but in the Spirit,” III/2, 334.

<sup>20</sup> IV/2, 115, emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (London: SCM, 1975), 42.

true divinity of that life. In overcoming this risk, Barth declares that

[T]he only-begotten Son is according to Jn. 1<sup>18</sup> the one God. God Himself, God in Himself, is in the mode of being of the only-begotten of the Father. ... He [Jesus Christ] is God as such. He is not a mere analogy of God, even the highest, in a sphere of reality distinct from God. He does not signify God Himself; He is God Himself.<sup>22</sup>

And Barth stresses therefore that Jesus Christ “is God as such and not a mere analogy of God, even the highest, in a sphere of reality distinct from God.”<sup>23</sup> On both sides, this Christological analogy is thus carefully balanced.

For Barth, the covenant relationship effected and revealed in Jesus Christ repeats for God “*ad extra* a relationship proper to Himself in His inner divine essence.”<sup>24</sup> This means that the relationship between God and the true human revealed in Jesus Christ is analogous to the prior intra-Trinitarian relationship of God the Father to God the Son.<sup>25</sup> These two relationships are analogous not in terms of any correspondence and similarity of being, an *analogia entis*, but in terms of what Barth calls “an *analogia relationis*.”<sup>26</sup> Jüngel asserts that this *analogia relationis* is

... a correspondence of relationships which are constituted by a ‘Yes’: a ‘Yes’ which thereby renders possible in the very first place the existence of the being to whom ‘Yes’ is said. It is the ‘Yes’ of the free love of God, which the trinitarian God speaks to Godself and which God then also speaks to God’s creation, thereby creating its correspondence.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> I/1, 425-426.

<sup>23</sup> I/1, 426. And therefore for Barth Jesus Christ does not merely signify God: He *is* God, I/1, 426.

<sup>24</sup> III/2, 218. Jüngel writes that “[T]his illuminates already what analogy means for Barth. In analogy, there occurs the repetition of a being, that is itself event and, as event, relation,” *Barth-Studien*, 214. Thus analogy in Barth is, for Jüngel, “fundamentally misunderstood, if the difference between this Being and every other being (*die Differenz dieses Seins zu jedem Seienden*) remains unobserved and the analogy is therefore understood as an *analogia entis*,” *Barth-Studien*, 215.

<sup>25</sup> III/2, 220. Barth writes in this connection that “the inward divine relationship between the One who rules and commands in majesty and the One who obeys in humility is identical with the very different relationship between God and one of His creatures, a man,” IV/1, 203.

<sup>26</sup> III/2, 220. Barth writes that the existence of a genuine counterpart within the being of God is “the secret prototype which is the basis of an obvious copy, a secret image and an obvious reflection in the co-existence of God and man, and also of the existence of man himself,” III/1, 183.

<sup>27</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 221-222. Willis notes that “the *analogia relationis* constitutes a continuing emphasis on the priority of grace,” *Ethics*, 212, while Jüngel observes that the *analogia entis* never reaches the arena of grace, *Barth-Studien*, 222. As analogy is constituted in this event of divine grace, it bears both ontic and noetic significance. Jüngel observes correspondingly that “the concept of *analogia relationis* in Barth is to be understood only in the sense of *analogia fidei*,” *Barth-Studien*, 223, and therefore “the recognisability of analogy is guaranteed by analogy itself,” *Barth-Studien*, 228. As Mangina notes, “[T]he language of ‘correspondence’ unpacks the *analogia fidei*. Ultimately grounded in Christ’s being as very God and very man, it is what makes possible faith’s knowledge of God, as well as any other human analogy or mirror of the divine grace - scripture, proclamation, church, Christian moral action,” *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 87 n.17.

Thus the ground of the *analogia relationis* is conceived actualistically as an ongoing event of becoming, in which the same freedom and love are operative on both sides.<sup>28</sup> As Daniel Price notes, the *analogia relationis* affirms that “at the core of both nature and grace is the person of God who reveals himself in Christ.”<sup>29</sup>

As a result of the original intra-Trinitarian relationship, John Macken notes, “[T]here is ... established a set or ladder of relationships between God and man.”<sup>30</sup> Constitutive of all the subsequent derivative analogous relationships is that, in parallel with the *analogans*, there is for Barth free differentiation and relation: “the existence of the I and the Thou in confrontation.”<sup>31</sup> Throughout this series of relationship Barth’s warning must be borne in mind: “[A]nalogy, even as the analogy of relation, does not entail likeness but correspondence of the unlike.”<sup>32</sup>

The most significant derivative analogy is the relationship between the Creator and the creature: between Jesus Christ and His fellow humanity.<sup>33</sup> Barth posits that the ethical agent is created by God in correspondence with the “relationship and

<sup>28</sup> III/2, 220. Willis does not approve of this Christological construal of the *analogia relationis*, arguing of Jesus Christ that “as the Son of God, and so God himself, he would necessarily function as the analogue rather than the analogate in any analogous relation,” *Ethics*, 213. Therefore, he contends, “[I]t is human nature generally, not the specific humanity of Christ, that would be accounted for on the basis of analogy,” *Ethics*, 213. Willis thus posits that the *sui generis* nature of the unity of God and humanity in Jesus Christ renders any description of the relationship between them as an example - or even the prime example - of the *analogia relationis* improper, *Ethics*, 213. What emerges from this apparently unique line of criticism is the way in which Willis seems to subordinate the *analogia relationis* grounded in Jesus Christ to a general concept of the *analogia relationis*. That is to say that Willis seems to treat the *analogia relations* as a prior concept or possibility to which its exemplification or actuality in Jesus Christ must “necessarily” conform. Clearly, for Barth, this methodology is wrong, bypassing entirely the particularism of Jesus Christ and the need to deduct from Jesus Christ rather than induct to Jesus Christ. Willis seems to confirm his misunderstanding of Barth on this point when he uses the logical principle of excluded middle to criticise Barth’s foundation of the *analogia relationis*, *Ethics*, 239. By contrast, for Barth the *analogia relationis* grounded in Jesus Christ is itself *sui generis*, and all considerations of necessity and logic must conform to it - not *vice versa*.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Price, *Karl Barth’s Anthropology in Light of Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 137.

<sup>30</sup> Macken, *Autonomy*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> III/1, 185. As Macken notes, then, “[T]he point of comparison in all these correspondences is not being as such but the freedom and love that is rooted in the subjectivity of God,” *Autonomy*, 60. Macken correctly finds the weakness in the Idealist reinterpretation of Barth to lie here, in its overlooking this fundamental relationality in the work of Barth, *Autonomy*, 143.

<sup>32</sup> III/1, 196.

<sup>33</sup> III/2, 324. Barth writes that “the history between Him [Jesus Christ] and us is primarily and properly the representation, reflection and correspondence of the life of God Himself,” IV/2, 347. Jüngel is thus right to posit that analogies are “necessary and unavoidable for the unfolding of the doctrine of man in the sense (*Sinne*) of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*,” *Barth-Studien*, 212.

differentiation in God Himself: created as a Thou that can be addressed by God but also as an I responsible to God.”<sup>34</sup> Barth writes correspondingly that the true nature of humanity is “not concealed but revealed in the person of Jesus, and in His nature we recognise our own, and that of every man.”<sup>35</sup> For Barth, then, the *imago Dei* of the ethical agent is constituted by the fact that the ethical agent is created into relationship, both with God and with other humans.<sup>36</sup> This *imago Dei* is construed by Barth actualistically. It is not a quality of the ethical agent, nor does it consist in anything she is or does.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, it is not something which she possesses, for it remains the case that “the image of God is exclusively the affair of God Himself in His disposing of man in incomprehensible mercy.”<sup>38</sup> Rather it is something to which she is called to correspond.<sup>39</sup> As Price notes,

[I]n view of the analogy of relations, it is incumbent on us to bring our actions into correspondence to the love that Jesus showed us. We are destined not only to be covenant partners with God, but also to reflect the divine love in our relations one to another.<sup>40</sup>

This existence in the *imago Dei* embraces not only the covenant partnership with God, but also the covenant fellowship of co-humanity.<sup>41</sup> For Barth, this co-humanity is the basic form of humanity,<sup>42</sup> and the original and proper form of this co-humanity is the co-existence of man and woman.<sup>43</sup> Barth asserts that there is “in the antithesis of Creator and creature an image and likeness, and in the twofoldness of the existence of man a reflection of the inner life of God Himself.”<sup>44</sup> Consequently, Barth

<sup>34</sup> III/1, 198. For Barth, correspondingly, Jesus Christ is human precisely as He is “a supreme I wholly determined by and to the Thou,” III/2, 216.

<sup>35</sup> III/2, 43. This basic analogy must be revealed to humanity, for “we have no analogy on the basis of which the nature and being of God as the Redeemer can be accessible to us,” II/1, 78.

<sup>36</sup> III/2, 324. Barth writes of the individual that “God created him in His own image in the fact that He did not create him alone but in this connexion and fellowship,” III/2, 324, and therefore “his creaturely being is a being in encounter,” III/2, 203.

<sup>37</sup> III/1, 184. It is thus misleading for John Thompson to suggest that for Barth, “the image is seen as a permanent feature of our humanity,” in “Jüngel on Barth,” in *The Possibilities of Theology*, ed. John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 179.

<sup>38</sup> III/1, 202. Barth notes that the participation of the ethical agent in the *imago Dei* does not primarily rest on her decision or action but on the transformation which has happened to her as a result of God’s decision concerning her, and only secondarily on her own decision and action, III/1, 204.

<sup>39</sup> III/1, 197.

<sup>40</sup> Price, *Karl Barth’s Anthropology*, 144.

<sup>41</sup> III/2, 323. Hartwell rightly argues that the earlier volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* construe the *imago Dei* differently, in terms of an appointment to reflect the glory of God - an image which had been totally destroyed and lost at the Fall, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 130, cf. I/1, 238 and I/1, 273.

<sup>42</sup> III/2, 285.

<sup>43</sup> III/2, 292.

<sup>44</sup> IV/1, 203. This contradicts the view of Willis that co-humanity is the basic instance of the *analogia*

contends that “life in the following of Jesus is the life of that covenant-partner of God who as such is so completely bound to his neighbour.”<sup>45</sup>

A number of further analogies are drawn from the *analogans*, including the relationship between the soul and the body of Jesus Christ,<sup>46</sup> and the relationship between Jesus Christ and the community.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Barth notes other analogies that are rooted in the relationship between the Creator and the creature: the relationship between heaven and earth,<sup>48</sup> the relationship between the soul and the body of the individual;<sup>49</sup> and similarly, the relationship between the history of salvation and creaturely history.<sup>50</sup>

## *ii) the result of analogy in theological anthropology*

Having surveyed in the previous section the analogical method Barth uses to fill out his theological anthropology from Jesus Christ, this section moves to examine the content his theological anthropology. In what follows, the nature, the history, and the action of the ethical agent in relation to Jesus Christ are examined in turn, before a final section considers the ‘ec-centric’ nature of being in Jesus Christ.

### *a) the nature of the ethical agent and Jesus Christ*

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*relationis, Ethics*, 225. On the hierarchical construal of co-humanity which Barth’s account preserves, see the helpful comment and corrective of Gorringe, *Karl Barth Against Hegemony*, 206-207.

<sup>45</sup> III/2, 622. This reflects that fact that just as Jesus Christ is “man for other men in the most comprehensive and radical sense,” III/2, 212, so correspondingly humanity is determined “as a being with others, or rather with the other man,” III/2, 243. Barth characterises the true ethical agent in encounter with another as one who looks the other in the eye, engages in mutual communication, renders mutual assistance, and does all this gladly, III/2, 250, 252, 260, and 265.

<sup>46</sup> III/2, 341.

<sup>47</sup> III/2, 341. Barth writes of the Church that “as the body, as the earthly-historical form of existence, of Jesus Christ, it is His likeness, and may and should recognise that this is so,” IV/3, 793. For Barth, the statement that Jesus Christ is the *imago Dei* has an inclusive character, including the community of Jesus Christ with Him, and thereby rendering the statement not only Christological, but also ecclesiological and anthropological, III/1, 205.

<sup>48</sup> III/2, 368. Barth notes, however, that this last relationship, along with the relationship between water and land and the relationships between non-human living creatures, are not I-Thou relationships after the manner of the *analogans*, III/1, 184.

<sup>49</sup> III/2, 368. In respect of the first two relationships here analogically deriving from that between the Creator and the creature, Jüngel notes that they pertain to nature, and not to grace, *Barth-Studien*, 215 - clearly there is again no relevant I-Thou relationship in these cases.

<sup>50</sup> III/3, 50. In similar vein, Barth elsewhere mentions - with varying degrees of appropriateness and helpfulness for contemporary theology - the analogous relationships between “father and child, king and people, master and servant,” IV/2, 58.



For Barth, the being of the ethical agent is determined by and in the being of Jesus Christ. Barth writes of this ontic determination that the ethical agent simply that “[H]e exists because Jesus Christ exists.”<sup>51</sup> He states that “[T]he ontological determination of humanity is grounded in the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus,”<sup>52</sup> and hence for the individual, “[T]he concrete form of his being with God is that he is with Jesus.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, for Barth, the whole being of the individual is determined “by God’s immediate presence and action in this man, by His eternal election and the mighty work of His life and death and resurrection corresponding to this election.”<sup>54</sup> The divine act of election which determines not only the being of God, but also that of humanity itself in Jesus Christ, is for Barth an act of grace. He asserts that “[T]he grace of Jesus Christ itself and alone is the reality in which from the very start man himself has his reality.”<sup>55</sup> Barth concludes that “[T]here is no humanity outside the humanity of Jesus Christ.”<sup>56</sup>

#### b) the history of the ethical agent and Jesus Christ

Given Barth’s actualistic ontology, he warns that this co-existence of the ethical agent and Jesus Christ must not be understood “after the mode and analogy of the relationship of two things determined by their states.”<sup>57</sup> Instead, the dependence of the ethical agent on Jesus Christ is conceived by Barth as resulting from the event in which “God inaugurates a movement of history between Himself and man.”<sup>58</sup> As, for Barth, the ethical agent has her true determination in the glory of God “in the very

<sup>51</sup> II/2, 539.

<sup>52</sup> III/2, 132.

<sup>53</sup> III/2, 140. Barth writes that “in Jesus Christ there is no independent man as such,” II/1, 166, and posits that “[M]an is no more, no less, no other than what he is through and with and for Jesus Christ. ... Without Christ he would not be man at all,” *TCL*, 19.

<sup>54</sup> III/2, 50. Barth writes that “from all eternity, we confront God, not in some form of self-will or self-sufficiency, but in His own Son; that we are what we are, not in our own name or person, but in the name and person of Jesus Christ,” II/2, 761. George Hunsinger notes lucidly that “[O]ur existence apart from Christ, in whatever aspect, can be taken as the basic truth about us only by disregarding God’s sovereign activity on our behalf,” *How to Read Karl Barth*, 38.

<sup>55</sup> II/2, 539.

<sup>56</sup> II/2, 541.

<sup>57</sup> III/2, 162.

<sup>58</sup> III/2, 163. Wolf Krötke argues that “[I]f we take seriously the fact that the eternal God has here bound himself with a man, then the history which here takes place is to be understood as a history really grounded in the eternity of God,” in “Karl Barth’s Anthropology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 163.

fact that it can participate in that history,"<sup>59</sup> so he posits that "the being of man is identical with the act or occurrence of this history."<sup>60</sup> Therefore, he contends, "[T]o say man is to say a history."<sup>61</sup>

The history of the ethical agent is not *any* history, however. Barth writes that

... the history of creaturely being is ... the history of the glory of God in the fact that it does not merely run alongside the history of Jesus Christ and therefore the history of the covenant of grace between God and man, but has its meaning in this, is conditioned and determined by it, serves it, and in its reflected light (and shadow) is the place, the sphere, the atmosphere and medium of its revelation.<sup>62</sup>

The centrality of the history of Jesus Christ is underlined when Barth contends that it is the "only one primary, direct and immediate fulfilment of the concept of history."<sup>63</sup> It is however revealed in this history - in which humanity is elected in Jesus Christ - that individuals "share in what He is and therefore in the history actualised in Him."<sup>64</sup> Jüngel therefore writes that "[B]etween the being of the man Jesus and the being of all humanity there is an ontological connection, because in the history of Jesus, God *makes* history for all humanity."<sup>65</sup> For Barth, then, the true being of an individual is therefore "his being in the history grounded in the man Jesus, in which God wills to be for him and he may be for God."<sup>66</sup> Heinz Zahrnt states correctly that, for Barth,

Jesus Christ appears not merely as a point in history, extending over thirty years, but as an event encompassing the whole history of what has taken place between God and

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<sup>59</sup> III/2, 74.

<sup>60</sup> III/2, 163.

<sup>61</sup> III/2, 248.

<sup>62</sup> III/3, 26. Barth writes of the history of Jesus Christ that "[A]s this individual history it is thus cosmic in origin and goal. As such it is not sterile. It is a fruitful history which newly shapes every human life," IV/4, 21. It is with this event in mind that Barth asserts that "[T]he concept of history in its true sense ... is introduced and achieved when something happens to a being in a certain state, i.e., when something new and other than its own nature befalls it," III/2, 158.

<sup>63</sup> III/2, 161. Indeed, Barth writes that "for all its singularity, as His history it was not and is not a private history, but a representative, and therefore a public. ... Therefore, in the most concrete sense of the term, the history of this One is world history," IV/2, 269. The reason for this is that "[T]o human essence in all its nature and corruption there now belongs the fact that in the one Jesus Christ, who as the true Son of God was and is also the true Son of Man, it has now become and is participant in this elevation and exaltation," IV/2, 270.

<sup>64</sup> III/2, 161.

<sup>65</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 240.

<sup>66</sup> III/2, 162. Barth writes that the history of Jesus Christ is "our true history, in an incomparably more direct and intimate way than anything which might present itself as our history in our own subjective experience, than anything which we might try to represent as our history in explanation of our own self-understanding," IV/1, 547.



man, beginning in eternity and extending into eternity.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, Barth writes of the individual that “[H]e could not know his own history as human (as distinct from purely natural) history apart from his share in the history of Jesus Christ.”<sup>68</sup> As Hunsinger notes in respect of Jesus Christ, “[I]n his history is objectively included the history of each and all.”<sup>69</sup>

At this point, however, there is a reciprocal aspect to the divine determination of human history. Not only is the history of each ethical agent included in Jesus Christ, but, as Hunsinger notes, “[C]onversely, the history of Jesus is viewed as included in that of every human being.”<sup>70</sup> Barth writes that “by the act of God he becomes the man of this history - the history of Jesus Christ.”<sup>71</sup> As Jesus Christ is the centre and meaning of human history, Jesus Christ is also objectively the centre and meaning of her existence.<sup>72</sup> As Joseph Mangina notes, “[F]or Barth, ... the ultimate background of pathos against which the self’s history unfolds is the action of God in Jesus Christ.”<sup>73</sup> Barth correspondingly writes that Jesus Christ is “at once the centre and the beginning and end of all the times of all the lifetimes of all men.”<sup>74</sup> And so Ingolf Dalferth is correct to suggest that for Barth,

... in the particular history of Jesus Christ ... by the power of the Spirit, we are all integrated so that this particular history is the pre-history and post-history of all our individual lives.<sup>75</sup>

The integration of histories is only possible by grace, for Barth notes that the covenant relationship “can be an ongoing history only in pure miracles.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Zahrnt, *The Question of God*, 95.

<sup>68</sup> *TCL*, 20.

<sup>69</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 109. There is no loss of the particular status of Jesus Christ, however: Barth notes that “He is the One who He alone is: not in isolation, for He is it for humanity and in the first instance for His community; but alone, and not together with it,” IV/3, 755.

<sup>70</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 109.

<sup>71</sup> IV/1, 573.

<sup>72</sup> III/4, 577. The real man is therefore “with God, confronted and prevented and elected and summoned by Him, in the fact that this history takes place in his own sphere,” III/2, 160.

<sup>73</sup> Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 189-190.

<sup>74</sup> III/2, 440.

<sup>75</sup> Dalferth, “Karl Barth’s eschatological realism,” 27. Willis correspondingly notes that “[I]t is this history, the history of salvation (*Heilsgeschichte*) centering in Jesus Christ, that provides the criterion of reality,” *Ethics*, 70. Hunsinger similarly states that “[B]ecause Christ is risen from the dead, no time or place, in human life, is bereft of the presence ... of the only Mediator and true Advocate between heaven and earth,” *Disruptive Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 146.

<sup>76</sup> *TCL*, 28.

c) the action of the ethical agent and Jesus Christ

This actualistic view of the history of the ethical agent has direct implications for the understanding of her action. In Barth's actualistic ontology, the being of Jesus Christ as a human is identical to His work: "the whole of His action, suffering and achievement."<sup>77</sup> Indeed Barth states unequivocally of Jesus Christ that the totality of His being in its scope for His community and the whole world was "identical with the totality of His activity."<sup>78</sup> Consequently, Barth posits a corresponding actualistic ontology for the ethical agent, writing that "[T]o exist as a man means to act,"<sup>79</sup> and that "[A] man is what he does."<sup>80</sup> Barth observes of the creature that

[I]ts being is its activity. It is the object of the *operatio* of God in creation and preservation, and as such it is caught up in an *operatio* of its own: in the limited efficacy which God has created and maintained for it; in its own finite activity which is different from the activity of God, just as its actuality is different from the actuality of God.<sup>81</sup>

Therefore although this being-in-activity in a history is enclosed in the history of Jesus Christ, Barth nevertheless affirms that the life of the individual is "a series of the acts of his own movement, enterprise and activity."<sup>82</sup> On the grounds of the biblical promise, then, Barth writes that "the man who really knows God's Word ... can understand himself only as one who exists in his act, in his self-determination."<sup>83</sup>

This profound actualism lies at the heart of Barth's theological anthropology. While the ethical agent is purely receptive in terms of the movement from God to herself, she is also "purely spontaneous in the movement to God."<sup>84</sup> The way in which Barth conceives of what it means to be 'real man' testifies to this twofold perception: Barth writes that "the being of man as a being with Jesus rests upon the election of God; and ... it consists in the hearing of the Word of God."<sup>85</sup> These two aspects together offer a concise definition of 'real man' that corresponds exactly to the ordered unity

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<sup>77</sup> III/2, 59. Barth writes of Jesus Christ that "His being as a man is His work," III/2, 59.

<sup>78</sup> IV/2, 193.

<sup>79</sup> II/2, 535.

<sup>80</sup> IV/1, 405. In correspondence with the being of Jesus Christ, then, the ethical agent "is active, engaged in movement," III/2, 195. Hunsinger observes that the being in act of Jesus Christ "is at the same time the prototype for all creaturely being as manifested in him," *How to Read Karl Barth*, 230.

<sup>81</sup> III/3, 90-91.

<sup>82</sup> III/2, 437.

<sup>83</sup> I/1, 200.

<sup>84</sup> III/2, 180.

<sup>85</sup> III/2, 142.

of the Word of God as both Gospel and Law: “[S]ummoned because chosen.”<sup>86</sup> Precisely because she is ‘chosen’ by God in Jesus Christ, the ethical agent is ‘summoned’ by God in Jesus Christ to correspond to her election.

Correspondence to election is thus not construed statically by Barth but as “a being lived in the act of answering the Word of God,”<sup>87</sup> and therefore as “a history in the strictest sense.”<sup>88</sup> Throughout her history with God, she exists “in willing and acting, in the venture of a series of decisions which is as long or as short as our temporal life,”<sup>89</sup> and therefore the being of the ethical agent is “constantly realising its existence in acts of free determination and decision.”<sup>90</sup> Self-determination is thus an ongoing event for the ethical agent, yet it is not an activity independent of God, for her history remains “under the transcendent leadership of God, in which decisions are made first by God and then also by man.”<sup>91</sup> For Barth, the self-determination of the ethical agent has “its beginning and its basis in another higher determination.”<sup>92</sup> There is therefore no question of the ethical agent simply or directly being the covenant partner of God as Jesus Christ is: rather what she is in her relationship to God depends directly on the Self-determination of God in Jesus Christ to be for her.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, the question of the self-determination of the ethical agent remains one of responsibility, decision, obedience, and action.<sup>94</sup> And so Barth concludes that “true

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<sup>86</sup> III/2, 150. Barth later paraphrases this instructively, writing: “God comes to man - this is the objective basis of man’s being. And man goes to God - this is the subjective basis,” III/2, 187. Barth writes of Jesus Christ as the ‘real man’ in that He “both is himself (in the movement from God) and posits himself (in the movement of return to Him),” III/2, 177.

<sup>87</sup> III/2, 175.

<sup>88</sup> III/2, 176. Barth proceeds to elucidate four defining characteristics of this life in partnership, characteristics which are lived out in action in a dynamic history. There is first, a knowledge of God, III/2, 176; second, obedience to God, III/2, 179; third, an invocation of God, III/2, 186 (which later becomes *the* dominant rubric of the Christian life in *TCL*); and fourth, and circumscribing the other three, “the character of the freedom which God imparts to it,” III/2, 192.

<sup>89</sup> II/2, 632.

<sup>90</sup> I/2, 364. Barth writes that the individual “exists and lives as he deliberately posits himself in some way in relation to God, to his fellow-men, and to his environment. His actions are this deliberate positing of himself,” III/4, 470.

<sup>91</sup> III/2, 124.

<sup>92</sup> I/1, 207.

<sup>93</sup> III/2, 225. And therefore the ethical agent is destined to *become* a true covenant-partner of God, III/2, 225. Krötke notes correctly that “[B]ecause God is Godself the advocate and guarantor of partnership, the human being in the covenant with this God can be a true partner,” in “Gott und Mensch als ‘Partner’,” 165.

<sup>94</sup> II/2, 511. In response to the command of God, the ethical agent “never ceases even for a moment objectively to give an answer,” II/2, 535. Werpehowski correctly notes that for Barth, “God claims our obedience ... because of what he has done for us in Jesus Christ,” in “Command and History,” 302. In

man is characterised by action, by good action, as the true God is also characterised by action, by good action.”<sup>95</sup>

d) the ‘ec-centric’ nature of the ethical agent in Jesus Christ

With the existence, the history, and the activity of the ethical agent finding their true determination in Jesus Christ, there is a real sense in which, for Barth, the ethical agent finds her true centre to be outside herself. Barth states of Jesus Christ that

His person, the person of the Son of God and therefore of God Himself, is by God’s gracious and righteous will *the* human person, our common Head and Representative. In Him God has seen each human person from all eternity.<sup>96</sup>

And therefore Barth posits that “we owe the reality and essence and continuance of our human life to Him, because He is the life of our life.”<sup>97</sup> He posits that the life of the ethical agent is “hid with Christ in God, never at all apart from Him, never at all independently of Him, never at all in and for itself.”<sup>98</sup> In faith, her life “has now its centre, its whence, the meaning of its attitude, and the criterion whether this attitude really has the corresponding meaning ... outside itself.”<sup>99</sup> Barth writes that “the new and inconceivable predicates of our life are real because they are the predicates of Jesus Christ.”<sup>100</sup> Barth therefore writes that “[W]e cannot, therefore, seek our own being and activity, so far as they still remain to us, in ourselves, but only in Him.”<sup>101</sup> Webster identifies this as the “ecstatic character” of Barth’s moral anthropology.<sup>102</sup>

In some passages, Barth brings out the ‘ec-centricity’ of the ethical agent in particularly strong terms. He asserts that in faith in Jesus Christ, the ethical agent is no longer in control at her centre, or better, she is outside herself at her centre, and

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this respect, Barth notes that “[I]t is good to be with Jesus and not elsewhere ... . The very thing which we try to do for God of ourselves will be the most perverted of all,” II/2, 570-571.

<sup>95</sup> III/4, 3.

<sup>96</sup> II/2, 778. John Webster notes that this is “a central conviction of the *Dogmatics*: the conviction that Jesus Christ is *reality*, that creaturely being and time are functions of his being and time,” *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 84.

<sup>97</sup> II/2, 778.

<sup>98</sup> II/1, 149.

<sup>99</sup> I/1, 207-208.

<sup>100</sup> II/2, 761.

<sup>101</sup> I/2, 391.

<sup>102</sup> Webster, *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 225. For Jüngel, this character of being *extra se* is appropriately expressed by the term ‘analogy’, *Barth-Studien*, 225.

only in this way in control.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, he writes that

[T]he only ultimate and really serious determination for the believer is that which proceeds from Jesus Christ. Ultimately and in the true sense he is no longer the subject. In and with his subjectivity he has become a predicate to the subject Jesus Christ, by whom he is both justified and sanctified, from whom he receives both comfort and direction.<sup>104</sup>

For Barth, this orientation is “not external and occasional.”<sup>105</sup> Rather it is only as an ongoing act in a dynamic history that the ethical agent exists as herself, as a Christian, with her centre in Jesus Christ.<sup>106</sup>

There is a potential danger here that the subjectivity of the ethical agent might be threatened or even eradicated at this point. Charles Waldrop posits that “it is difficult to see how the many people who are assumed in and with the human nature of Jesus can have an independent existence.”<sup>107</sup> However, within the covenant of grace, this danger is foreclosed for Barth by the patience of God, which makes room for true human existence. He writes of this patience as the will of God

... to allow to another ... space and time for the development of its own existence, thus conceding to this existence a reality side by side with His own, and fulfilling His will toward this other in such a way that He does not suspend and destroy it as this other but accompanies and sustains it and allows it to develop in freedom.<sup>108</sup>

And therefore the individual being of the ethical agent is not lost in Jesus Christ: there remain two subjects. Even as Jesus Christ becomes the Lord of her thinking, speech, and action, He does so “in such a way that the human person of the Christian is validated and honoured in full and genuine freedom.”<sup>109</sup> And even as the ethical agent knows herself not in herself but in Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ remains the

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<sup>103</sup> IV/1, 743. Barth notes that in faith, the individual “has found in Him the true centre of himself which is outside himself. It means that he must now cling to Him, and depend on Him, that he finds that he belongs to Him,” IV/1, 744.

<sup>104</sup> I/2, 313-314. Or again, Barth declares that the individual “is not an independent subject, to be considered independently. He exists because Jesus Christ exists. He exists as a predicate of this Subject, i.e. that which has been decided and is real for man in this Subject is true for him,” II/2, 539.

<sup>105</sup> IV/1, 743.

<sup>106</sup> IV/2, 271. For Barth, the ethical agent who lives an abstract, subjective selfhood apart from Jesus Christ cannot exist as one who moves and is obedient to God, and therefore cannot know herself as a Christian, for it is only in Jesus Christ that the Christian is revealed, IV/2, 271.

<sup>107</sup> Charles T. Waldrop, *Karl Barth's Christology - Its Basic Alexandrian Character* (Berlin: Mouton, 1984), 177.

<sup>108</sup> II/1, 409-410.

<sup>109</sup> IV/3, 547. Barth concludes that “precisely in this fellowship of encounter [of the Christian with Christ] there is not merely safeguarded the sovereignty of God, of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit, but also the freedom of the human partner is preserved from dissolution,” IV/3, 540.



“Other who is not identical with me, and with whom I am not, and do not become, identical.”<sup>110</sup> Therefore, Barth declares, “Christ does not merge into the Christian nor the Christian into Christ.”<sup>111</sup> While the ‘I’ of the ethical agent may derive only from the ‘Thou’ of God, the ethical agent remains a true human subject.<sup>112</sup>

The God of the covenant of grace thus neither humiliates nor insults the individual: “He does not make him a mere spectator, let alone a puppet.”<sup>113</sup> When God acts on behalf of the ethical agent, the divine activity does not suspend but recognises the reality of the ethical agent, and therefore “does not exclude but includes its independent life.”<sup>114</sup> The foundation of this relationship is the self-giving love of God.<sup>115</sup> And therefore Barth believes that without jeopardising or diminishing either party, it is not only the ethical agent but also Jesus Christ who exists ‘ec-centrally’, the latter as the ruling principle of the history of the former and the former as element adopted into the history of the latter.<sup>116</sup> Barth notes that the ethical agent only lives spiritually as a Christian

... as and to the extent that they live *ec-centrally*. ... They can only look beyond

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<sup>110</sup> IV/2, 283.

<sup>111</sup> IV/3, 539. While the inconceivable predicates of the new being of the ethical agent in Jesus Christ can only be discovered in Him, nonetheless Barth writes that “we are actually the new man with these inconceivable predicates, II/2, 762. Thus Barth is adamant that “God’s Word no more swallows up man than eschatology does history,” *TCL*, 176, but acknowledges that “[T]he Word of God does, however, bring order into a man’s life: super- and sub-ordination. It does this by putting itself at the head of all the active and speaking factors of his life,” *TCL*, 176.

<sup>112</sup> I/1, 245. Throughout, then, Barth insists that “man’s choosing, deciding and willing, his knowledge of God and of self, is only real where it is *his* action, work or deed,” III/2, 181, emphasis added.

<sup>113</sup> IV/3, 528.

<sup>114</sup> II/1, 411.

<sup>115</sup> IV/2, 788.

<sup>116</sup> IV/3, 548. Jüngel notes that Barth only comes to a positive reception of the formula ‘*in nobis*’ relatively late in the *Church Dogmatics*, earlier preferring the terms ‘*extra nos*’ and ‘*pro nobis*’, *Barth-Studien*, 270. By the time of volume IV/4, Barth writes of the fruitful history of Jesus Christ, that “[H]aving taken place *extra nos*, it also works *in nobis*, introducing a new being of every man,” IV/4, 21, and that the self-attestation of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is thus “His own self-impartation to man, His own almighty and perfect work on him and in him,” IV/4, 34. Jüngel posits in this connection that “the *in nobis* must be thought out as a *poni nos extra nos*,” *Barth-Studien*, 272, but cautions that “the *in nobis* must be understood in light of the *in Christo* (and not the other way around),” *Barth-Studien*, 272 n.70. This view of the work of Christ clearly contradicts Willis’ view that reconciliation and justification are something that “has taken place *for* him in Jesus Christ, and that has come *to* him in the Holy Spirit, but which has in no sense occurred directly *in* him,” *Ethics*, 254, cf. similar comments on sanctification, *Ethics*, 260. Rather, as John Webster notes, “[T]he history of Jesus Christ is thus not *only* substitutionary, such that all subsequent histories simply look back to a perfected achievement. His history generates imitation,” in “The Christian in Revolt: Some Reflections on *The Christian Life*,” in *Reckoning with Barth*, ed. Nigel Biggar (London: Mowbray, 1988), 125.



themselves, clinging to God himself, and to God only in Jesus Christ, and this only as they are freed to do so, and continually freed to do so, by the Holy Spirit.<sup>117</sup>

This actualistic Trinitarian grounding does not detract from the fact that the individual “constituted in the being and work of Jesus Christ and awakened as such by the power of the Holy Spirit is in the last resort the individual Christian in the act of his personal faith.”<sup>118</sup>

## **B - the ethical agent in distinction from Jesus Christ**

For all the analogical similarity between Jesus Christ and the ethical agent, there remain two critical differences: the first pertains to the creatureliness of the ethical agent, and the second to the sinfulness of the ethical agent. In the first two sections which follow, each of these aspects will be considered in turn, while in the third, the limitation of the sinfulness of the ethical agent will be explored.

### *i) the creatureliness of the ethical agent*

The being of the ethical agent is not self-given but is ontologically dependent on and derivative from the election of humanity in Jesus Christ. Barth argues that the ethical agent participates in the true nature of humanity only because Jesus Christ does so first.<sup>119</sup> For Barth, “this relation is not peripheral but central, not incidental but essential to that which makes him a real man.”<sup>120</sup> Therefore created human being is radically contingent:

[I]f human being is a being with God, we have to say first and comprehensively that it is a being which derives from God. It is a being dependent on God. It is not identical with the being of God. ... It is distinct from and to that extent independent of the being of God. But in this distinction and independence it does not exist without but only by the divine being. It is a being absolutely grounded in the latter and therefore absolutely

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<sup>117</sup> *TCL*, 194. There is here a corresponding ecclesial ‘ec-centricity’, as Barth writes of the Church that “[T]he centre around which it moves eccentrically is ... the world for which God is,” IV/3, 762.

<sup>118</sup> IV/1, 751.

<sup>119</sup> III/2, 51. Barth writes that “[M]an without God is not; he has neither being nor existence,” III/2, 345. Barth asserts that the individual is grounded in the call of God in the election of Jesus Christ, and as such, there is a “real pre-existence of man ... in the counsel of God, and to that extent, in God Himself, i.e. in the Son of God,” III/2, 155. This does not, of course, bestow eternity on the ethical agent: Barth insists that “[T]here was a time when we were not,” III/4, 577.

<sup>120</sup> III/2, 123. As Nigel Biggar correctly notes, then, for Barth “the very first thing to be said about humans is that they stand in relation to God,” in “Barth’s trinitarian ethic,” 216.

determined and conditioned by it.<sup>121</sup>

This grounding, determining, and conditioning is construed by Barth in actualistic fashion, as an event which is willed, decided and effected by God and which must therefore “continually take place anew - every morning, every moment.”<sup>122</sup> This view emphasises the “supreme disparity between human being and divine ... between the coming of God and the going of man, between the objective and subjective basis of human being.”<sup>123</sup> On the one hand, Barth writes of God that

... He is self-motivated person. No other being exists absolutely in its act. No other being is absolutely its own, conscious, willed and executed decision. Only in the illusion of sin can man ascribe this being to himself ...<sup>124</sup>

On the other hand, he states that created beings “are completely and utterly other than God, completely and utterly dependent upon Him, and therefore made by Him alone into what they are.”<sup>125</sup> Barth concisely concludes that while God is “self-grounded, self-positing, self-conditioning, and self-causing,” the ethical agent is “not grounded in itself but absolutely from outside and therefore not at all within itself.”<sup>126</sup> Herein lies the continued affirmation in the *Church Dogmatics* of the “infinite qualitative difference” between God and humanity that Barth never retracted.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> III/2, 140.

<sup>122</sup> III/2, 348.

<sup>123</sup> III/2, 186-187.

<sup>124</sup> II/1, 271. The exception is, of course, the man Jesus: Barth writes, “Jesus wills and fulfils Himself. He is His own ground and His own intention,” III/2, 332. This is linked by Barth to the unique relationship between the man Jesus and the Holy Spirit, a relationship that is so close and special that Jesus “owes no more and no less than His existence itself and as such to the Holy Spirit,” III/2, 333.

<sup>125</sup> II/2, 344.

<sup>126</sup> III/3, 103. Barth notes simply: “[I]f God comes to man in His divine Word, He does not do so because He needs man. ... If man goes to God in responsibility before Him, he does so because he needs God,” III/2, 187.

<sup>127</sup> II/2, 577. At this point it is worth noting that Barth does write of the ‘real man’ as a creature “not enclosed within the circle of its intrinsic possibilities,” III/2, 165; as “already in the act of transcending himself,” III/2, 166; as transcending “the limits of his state,” III/2, 175; and, in the movement from God and back to God, as being involved in a “penetration and transcending of the limits of the creature,” III/2, 187. Thus, as Mangina notes, Barth does not “deny human beings are self-transcendent, but ... suggest[s] that what makes us such is the fact that we are transcended by that which is external to ourselves,” *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 14, *pace* the contention of Willis that there is “no irreducible discontinuity between Adam (created human nature) and Christ,” *Ethics*, 145. That which enables the ethical agent to transcend her created nature is her particular calling by the Word of God in God’s Word of grace, which, Barth notes, “comes to it from without,” III/2, 165, namely in the command of God which summons the individual “to transcend himself,” III/4, 473. The life of ‘real man’ is nevertheless to be seen in correspondence with his creatureliness, for Barth notes that “there has to be a common factor, and therefore a correspondence and similarity, between the determination of man for ... covenant-partnership and his creatureliness,” III/2, 225. And he stresses elsewhere that “[I]t is not to a transcendent *alter ego* (if there are such things) that the divine possibility in revelation is given to apprehend. It is given to me myself,” I/2, 266. Moreover, nothing

ii) the sinfulness of the ethical agent

In addition to the creatureliness of the ethical agent, however, there is also the distinguishing matter of her fallenness. While Barth notes that the Word of God reveals in Jesus Christ “the real man who is not effaced by our sin,”<sup>128</sup> so too he recognises that it also reveals “the sinner who has covered his own creaturely being with shame.”<sup>129</sup> Thus Barth laments that “the revelation of God does not show us man as we wish to see him, in the wholeness of his created being, but in its perversion and corruption.”<sup>130</sup> In actualistic terms, the Word of God reveals that while the being-in-act of Jesus Christ corresponds perfectly to God’s eternal (Self-)determination in election, the being-in-act of the ethical agent in her self-determination does not perfectly correspond to her divine determination in election. Thus the individual “does not accept as grace, and gratefully correspond to, the distinction and dignity conferred on him by the one and only God.”<sup>131</sup> For Barth, any picture of creatureliness which takes no account of this sinfulness is an abstract concept.<sup>132</sup>

Barth conceives of this sinfulness in a highly actualistic way. In her sinfulness, he writes, the ethical agent is “‘selfless’ in the worst sense of the word, i.e., incapable of genuine self-determination and therefore unfree.”<sup>133</sup> She falls in her sinfulness into the abyss - grasping not only that which is made impossible for her but also that from which she is preserved.<sup>134</sup> Obedience is therefore for Barth “the very thing that we do

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in Barth’s construal of ‘transcendence’ suggests that the contingency and absolute dependence on God of the creature is in any way abrogated in the case of ‘real man’: on the contrary, Barth notes that “his going to God, his responsibility before Him, must be of such a kind as to realise and express his limitation,” III/2, 189.

<sup>128</sup> III/2, 198.

<sup>129</sup> III/2, 27. This particular noetic ordering in revelation is important: for Barth, the Gospel is prior to the Law and thus “[O]nly those who taste and see how gracious the Lord is can know their sin,” III/2, 36. It is in God’s attitude to Jesus Christ that “the decision is made that the divine grace is primary and the sin of man secondary, and that the primary factor is more powerful than the secondary,” III/2, 41. Thus, as Mangina notes, “there can be no independent knowledge of sin apart from grace,” in *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 103.

<sup>130</sup> III/2, 26. In this perversion and corruption, the individual stands not only “in contradiction to God his Creator, but also to himself and the end for which he was created,” III/2, 26.

<sup>131</sup> II/2, 315.

<sup>132</sup> III/2, 32.

<sup>133</sup> IV/1, 464.

<sup>134</sup> III/2, 147. Barth writes starkly that the sinful individual “automatically betrays himself. He causes himself to fall. He as it were wrenches himself away from his true bearings. He delivers himself up to

not do.”<sup>135</sup> Even when the ethical agent tries to correspond to the good, Barth notes that “what we now do will always be something different,”<sup>136</sup> for ethical action is always for Barth “an action conditioned, and indeed perverted, by our sin.”<sup>137</sup> Barth concludes that “*hominum confusione* does not indicate a state in which men find themselves, but an action, an activity and work, in which they are engaged.”<sup>138</sup>

### *iii) the limitation of the sinfulness of the ethical agent*

In spite of the reality and the gravity of the sinfulness of the creature, Barth nevertheless affirms that he is “reached and pierced by God even when he becomes guilty of ontological impossibility, of godlessness.”<sup>139</sup> In this way, the divine command is simultaneously the divine offer, and it remains this “even for the man who will not obey it.”<sup>140</sup> Therefore, in spite of her sinfulness and the false use of her freedom, the ethical agent remains under the divine determination. Barth writes that

... an elect man is ... elect in and with and by and for Jesus Christ. To this determination from Him and to Him everything which might otherwise be regarded as his natural and historical determination is subject.<sup>141</sup>

Barth believes that because for God, “the word ‘event’ or ‘act’ is *final*, and cannot be surpassed or compromised,”<sup>142</sup> so the sinfulness of the acts of the individual “is not the last word that has been spoken about him ... [and] cannot even be the first word about him.”<sup>143</sup> Instead, the primacy of divine grace over human sin and its necessary condemnation is decided and revealed in God’s attitude to the man Jesus Christ.<sup>144</sup> Consequently, Barth affirms that “[I]n Jesus Christ is spoken the first and the last

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shame and corruption,” III/2, 33. In this way, he can “only forfeit and lose himself,” III/2, 194.

<sup>135</sup> II/2, 745.

<sup>136</sup> II/2, 578.

<sup>137</sup> II/2, 578.

<sup>138</sup> IV/3, 695.

<sup>139</sup> III/2, 141.

<sup>140</sup> II/2, 618. Barth writes that “God does not acquiesce in the creature’s self-destruction as its own enemy. He sees to it that His own prior claim on the creature, and its own true claim to life, is not rendered null and void,” II/2, 34. McCormack notes in this connection that “[H]uman beings can choose to live as covenant-breakers, as those who refuse to act as the covenant-partners God has appointed them to be. But even where this occurs, the human cannot really cease to be what he/she is,” in “The Being of Holy Scripture is in Becoming,” 65.

<sup>141</sup> II/2, 410.

<sup>142</sup> II/1, 263.

<sup>143</sup> III/2, 31.

<sup>144</sup> III/3, 41. Barth asserts that “the fact that man is condemned and judged by God is not the original and basic determination of his existence, neither is it the last and definitive determination,” *TCL*, 26.

word about us, and the last with all the power of the first.”<sup>145</sup> And therefore, Barth writes that in Jesus Christ, “I am revealed to myself as he who in the totality of his existence is received and accepted by Him.”<sup>146</sup> The ethical agent belongs neither to herself nor to Satan but to God, a God who will not let her go.<sup>147</sup>

Just as to write of the creature without reference to sin is an abstraction, so also, Barth posits, “[S]inful man in himself ... is an abstract concept.”<sup>148</sup> At the heart of this contention is the core belief that the divine determination of the individual is prior to the self-determination of the individual.<sup>149</sup> Barth writes that even as the existence of the ethical agent is determined as an act of self-determination, it is nonetheless simultaneously “confronted by something outside and over against it, by which it is determined, and indeed totally determined.”<sup>150</sup> The self-determining power of the ethical agent is therefore relativised, entirely circumscribed by her determination in the divine act of election. Barth writes that “it loses its autonomy outside this predetermination, and therefore its significance over against God or in

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<sup>145</sup> III/2, 50.

<sup>146</sup> I/2, 706. Therefore Barth notes that “[S]inful man as such is not the real man. ... [T]he real man is the sinner who participates in the grace of God,” III/2, 32. The Word of God thus has a double function: just as only in its light can it be seen that the ethical agent does not correspond in her self-determination to her determination by God, so too only by that same light can it be seen that her determination is *not* exhausted by her self-determination. Barth states that “the self-determination of the first [partner, i.e. God], while not cancelling the self-determination of the second [partner, i.e. the creature], is the sovereign predetermination which precedes it absolutely,” II/1, 312. This divine predetermination also has noetic primacy over the creaturely self-determination: Barth asserts that “only the revelation of forgiveness is the revelation of our sins,” II/2, 752.

<sup>147</sup> III/2, 34. While the individual may be lost to himself, he is not lost to his Creator, III/2, 197, for he has not “fallen lower than the depth to which God humbled Himself for him in Jesus Christ,” IV/1, 480-481. Barth writes that “[H]e may let go of God, but God does not let go of him,” II/2, 317.

<sup>148</sup> III/2, 32.

<sup>149</sup> II/2, 633. Barth writes, “God is gracious to us in Jesus Christ. This fact is the starting-point of all the ways and works of God and our own starting-point,” II/2, 633. Barth therefore notes that this ‘Yes’ of God “is unconditional in its certainty, preceding all self-determination and outlasting any change in self-determination on the part of the creature,” II/2, 31. As Webster observes, Barth’s ontology of human action thereby “excludes any idea that human acts are fundamentally determinative of the agent,” *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 159, while Werpehowski correspondingly posits that “[H]uman self-determination is effectively de-centered,” in “Hearing the Divine Command,” 65.

<sup>150</sup> I/2, 266. Barth himself explicitly asserts that “[M]an never dissolves into, nor is he exhausted by, his determination by his situation,” IV/3, 804. Jüngel writes that “[W]hen dealing with the self-determination of a human being, one is dealing simultaneously with God,” *Barth-Studien*, 340. However, it would be incorrect to see the divine determination as *de facto* vitiating the human self-determination. Barth writes that “[W]e are foreordained and perceived by God in our genuine human self-determination. That it is under divine foreordination does not alter the fact that it is genuine human self-determination,” II/1, 586.



competition with God.”<sup>151</sup>

This is for Barth the good news of the Gospel, that “Godlessness is not ... a possibility, but an ontological impossibility for man.”<sup>152</sup> Even as God commands and judges, the Law cannot be heard without the Gospel, for anyone “who does not hear this original Yes of the command does not hear it at all.”<sup>153</sup> For the ethical agent responding to this command of God and her original divine determination, “[T]o hear and obey God’s commandment is to hear and obey this prior decision.”<sup>154</sup> As this occurs in event, the ethical agent not only corresponds to her election in Jesus Christ, as determined by God, but also actualises her true self-determination, in which she is determined by the Word of God.<sup>155</sup> Barth notes that

... what God in His love wills from us to His glory is that our existence in the determination which we ourselves give to it should be a sign of the fact that we stand under His predetermination.<sup>156</sup>

However, this possibility of true self-determination remains for Barth a divine one, for he argues that for it to occur, “man needs this event - that God should say that He is gracious to him.”<sup>157</sup> This necessary Word is said to humanity “in the man Jesus.”<sup>158</sup>

### **C - critical analysis of the ethical agent**

The fact that Barth works within an entirely Christocentric framework, and draws analogies from that source alone, has led to the accusation that his theology empties history of meaning and undermines creation. This section first explores and then analyses this criticism.

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<sup>151</sup> I/2, 313.

<sup>152</sup> III/2, 136. Barth posits that “the fact that we are with God is not merely one of many determinations of our being, derivative and mutable, but the basic determination, original and immutable,” III/2, 135-136.

<sup>153</sup> II/2, 735. Thus beyond the sinful actions of humanity, Barth writes that there is a “quality in which God knows us beyond His knowledge of us as sinners,” II/2, 754.

<sup>154</sup> II/2, 735-736. This prior decision lies in the Gospel - the eternal counsel of God to elect in grace the man Jesus, and all others in Him, III/2, 142-143. Barth writes that “even as God orders man He addresses him as one whom He loves,” II/2, 632. Barth is adamant that “[T]he Gospel rightly seen and understood is always the victorious Gospel. It always has the last word,” II/1, 236. Jüngel notes that “[I]n anthropological terms, Barth attaches the Gospel to human being and the Law to human action, the self-determining decision of the human,” *Barth-Studien*, 203.

<sup>155</sup> I/1, 201.

<sup>156</sup> I/2, 401.

<sup>157</sup> III/2, 165.

<sup>158</sup> III/2, 164.



i) criticism of the ethical agent

The key criticism of Barth's theological anthropology is that its Christocentric use of analogy is to the detriment of the significance of the ethical agent and her history. Heinz Zahrnt writes that "[T]he perilously great skill of Barth lies in his unrestrained application of the analogical method,"<sup>159</sup> and consequently argues that

... every theologian who has studied the Bible will disagree with Barth when he considers the history of the world as devoid of any meaning or value of its own, serving only as the analogy, image, sign, correspondence and adumbration of the history of salvation, and that this is so from all eternity.<sup>160</sup>

In a similar vein, Macken argues that "Barth's attempt to carry through the analogy of relation in speaking of phenomenal or empirical reality leads to confusion,"<sup>161</sup> with the result that Barth "neglects the empirical human subject of faith and of history and does not accord him substance and weight."<sup>162</sup> Willis argues similarly that Barth allows "his view of the *empirical* context ... to be delimited entirely by the *ontological* context and event of the total movement of God,"<sup>163</sup> a move which he describes as "both philosophically and theologically unsatisfactory."<sup>164</sup>

The danger perceived by this criticism is that, in Willis' words, Barth's theology appears "to submerge the lines of demarcation between creation and reconciliation."<sup>165</sup> Macken contends that Barth's account of inner-worldly knowledge and freedom is merely a bare stage for the drama of salvation history,<sup>166</sup> as creation itself becomes no more than "a shadow, an insubstantial outer shell, an empty theatre, a foil for grace."<sup>167</sup> Zahrnt correspondingly argues that Barth's Christological method means that "the reality of the redemption overwhelms the reality of creation -

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<sup>159</sup> Zahrnt, *The Question of God*, 105.

<sup>160</sup> Zahrnt, *The Question of God*, 106-107.

<sup>161</sup> Macken, *Autonomy*, 174. Macken posits that the analogies are not able to speak adequately "about the nature of the phenomenon about which they speak because they are confined to statements about the relationship between such phenomena and Revelation," *Autonomy*, 174.

<sup>162</sup> Macken, *Autonomy*, 157.

<sup>163</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 199.

<sup>164</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 199.

<sup>165</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 170.

<sup>166</sup> Macken, *Autonomy*, 174.

<sup>167</sup> Macken, *Autonomy*, 157.

nature, history, the world and man - like a tidal wave."<sup>168</sup> G. C. Berkouwer wonders at this point what significance is left to history and to the historical triumph achieved in Jesus Christ,<sup>169</sup> while Richard Roberts concludes sharply that Barth presents "the most profound and systematically consistent theological alienation of the natural order ever achieved."<sup>170</sup>

As the order of creation risks being engulfed by the order of reconciliation, so too, the critics claim, the importance of sin is reduced. Macken suggests that Barth's Christological method "makes the consideration of a sound distinction between nature and grace and the contingency of sin and reconciliation with God almost impossible."<sup>171</sup> For Biggar, such problems arise as Barth "places *all* human beings in the order of reconciliation."<sup>172</sup> Gerhard Ebeling comments that

[T]he correct theological use of the figure of analogy is dependent on it not skipping the opposition of sin and grace, which is first truly real in the fundamental situation of the believer. Otherwise analogy threatens to become a source of equivocations.<sup>173</sup>

And Zahrnt posits that Barth encounters great difficulty in dealing with the reality of sin, and notes that "in proportion as evil loses its historical reality, the redeeming act of Christ also diminishes in historical reality."<sup>174</sup>

## *ii) analysis of the ethical agent*

In assessing this criticism of Barth's conception of the ethical agent, it is necessary to observe that much of the criticism stems from Barth's methodological decision to ground his theological anthropology by analogy from Christology. Necessarily, this decision, in which the divine determination of the ethical agent is more real and more significant than her own (sinful) self-determination, has consequences for the relative significance of her empirical being and activity and of her history in creation.

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<sup>168</sup> Zahrnt, *The Question of God*, 105. Zahrnt complains that "[V]irtually no other theology talks so much about events, happenings and history as Barth's, but there is virtually no theology with so little action, because all the action has already taken place in eternity," *The Question of God*, 113.

<sup>169</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, tr. Harry R. Boer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 250.

<sup>170</sup> Roberts, *A Theology on its Way?*, 37.

<sup>171</sup> Macken, *Autonomy*, 168.

<sup>172</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 5.

<sup>173</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, "Über die Reformation hinaus?," in *ZThK*, Beiheft 6 (1986), 65.

<sup>174</sup> Zahrnt, *The Question of God*, 114-115.

Matheny consequently notes that Barth's concept of history

... results in the relativization of all creaturely space and time in relation to divine history wherein, priority is allotted to God's particularity in the explication of the theological understanding of history in general.<sup>175</sup>

The relativisation of creaturely being and history and sinfulness nevertheless does not represent their vitiation for Barth. There are two reasons for this - the first is found in the teleology of creation and the second in the decision of election.

First, Barth is clear that creation has no independent purpose or importance in and of itself, and therefore asserts that "human nature and human history in general have no independent signification."<sup>176</sup> By contrast, Barth states that creation is

... the presupposition of the history of the intercourse between God and man which rests upon it externally, which is made possible by it technically, which follows it externally and temporally, and which continues its history inwardly - creation as the way and means to the covenant.<sup>177</sup>

As such, then, creation is for Barth "one long preparation, and therefore the being and existence of the creature one long readiness, for what God will intend and do in the history of the covenant."<sup>178</sup> The significance and meaning of creation is thus to be found in its teleology, as the external basis of the covenant.<sup>179</sup> Correspondingly, however, Barth notes that there cannot follow from the existence of the creature "an immanent determination of its goal or purpose, or a claim to any right, meaning or dignity of its existence and nature accruing to it except as gift."<sup>180</sup> Nevertheless, precisely its importance lies in the gift that by virtue of its creation, "the creature is destined, prepared and equipped to be a partner of this covenant."<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Matheny, *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 64. It is this aspect of Barth's theology which Roberts so clearly resists when he states that Barth's doctrine of time must "provide a concrete account of time as it is experienced and understood outside the purview of theology," *A Theology on its Way?*, 17, and, in its failure to do this, laments that Barth's theology "stays systematically at one remove from the texture of reality as normally experienced," *A Theology on its Way?*, 36. Hunsinger notes that Roberts fails almost entirely to take into account the Trinitarian structure of Barth's account of time, *Disruptive Grace*, 197.

<sup>176</sup> II/2, 8.

<sup>177</sup> III/1, 229.

<sup>178</sup> III/1, 231.

<sup>179</sup> III/1, 94.

<sup>180</sup> III/1, 95.

<sup>181</sup> III/1, 97. Busch usefully draw a parallel here to Barth's doctrine of Law and Gospel: "[A]s the law is not a 'form' that can be randomly filled, but rather the law of God only as the form of the gospel, creation is not a neutral thing that can be randomly defined. As God's creation, it must be understood solely in terms of the covenant," *The Great Passion*, 181.

Second, moreover, in the eternal divine decision of election, God determines Godself for sinful humanity and sinful humanity for Godself in Jesus Christ.<sup>182</sup> As a result of this decision, Barth writes of Jesus Christ that God

... exists and acts and speaks here in the form of One who is weak and impotent, the eternal as One who is temporal and perishing, the Most High in the deepest humility. The glorious One is covered with shame. The One who lives forever has fallen a prey to death. ... In short, the Lord is a servant, a slave. And it is not accidental.<sup>183</sup>

If, then, God has determined to become human in the history of Jesus Christ, and if that determination is constitutive of the eternal being of God, then the being of God cannot *a posteriori* rightly be conceived *without* that history. As McCormack notes, therefore,

[H]istory could not possibly have a greater significance if even the being of God is constituted eternally, in and for itself, by way of anticipation of that which God will undergo as human in time.<sup>184</sup>

Given that, for Barth, the ontically definitive Self-humiliation of God takes place *within* human history, it is hard to understand how Zahrnt writes that “[W]hat is missing in this theology of God’s turning towards man is man in his concrete situation.”<sup>185</sup> It is precisely in human history that God turns to the ethical agent in Jesus Christ and it is precisely in human history that God takes sin in all its seriousness. Barth writes that God “descends to the depths, and concerns Himself with nothingness, because in His goodness He does not will to cease to be concerned for His creature.”<sup>186</sup> And therefore, Barth asserts, “[T]he history of Jesus Christ as the end and meaning of creation is not a drama which is played out at a remote distance and which he [the individual] can view as an interested or disinterested spectator.”<sup>187</sup> Rather, God in Jesus Christ fulfils the judgement on human sin precisely by taking the place of the ethical agent in history,

... by treading the way of sinners to its bitter end in death, in destruction, in the limitless anguish of separation from God, by delivering up sinful man and sin in His own person to the non-being which is properly theirs, the non-being, the nothingness to which man

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<sup>182</sup> II/2, 94.

<sup>183</sup> IV/1, 176.

<sup>184</sup> Bruce McCormack, “*Justitia Aliena*: Karl Barth in Conversation with the Evangelical Doctrine of Imputed Righteousness,” lecture given at Rutherford House, Edinburgh, on August 24th, 2003,” 28.

<sup>185</sup> Zahrnt, *The Question of God*, 121.

<sup>186</sup> III/3, 357.

<sup>187</sup> III/1, 387.

has fallen victim as a sinner and towards which he relentlessly hastens.<sup>188</sup>

By following this path in history, Jesus Christ reveals not only the significance of human history but also the seriousness of human sin. Barth correspondingly asks, “[H]ow can we overlook or deny that we have to do here with encounter and struggle, and therefore with history?”<sup>189</sup>

In evaluating the criticism of Barth at this point, then, it is important to bear in mind Barth’s starting point in Christology, which, as Webster notes, “disallows the use of categories such as ‘creation’ or ‘history’ as a means of securing *remoto Christo* the existence of the human creature.”<sup>190</sup> If one accepts Barth’s use of analogy at this point, however, then it can easily be seen how Barth affirms the significance of creation, the importance of history, and the gravity of sin in his theological anthropology. As Timothy Gorringer resoundingly concludes at this point, against Macken, for Barth, “[G]race establishes reality, it does not deny it.”<sup>191</sup>

## D - summary

In the theological anthropology of Karl Barth, the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ is the noetic basis of human being as and because it is also the ontic basis of human being.<sup>192</sup> In this way, it structures both the possibilities and the limitations of the life of the ethical agent. To be with God is not one of the many transitory determinations of her being, but her basic determination, originally and immutably.<sup>193</sup> As Barth notes, “Primarily and finally we ourselves *are* what we are in *Him*.”<sup>194</sup> At the heart of Barth’s theology and ethics there is therefore a radical circumscription and specification of human self-determination, as secondary and derivative in relation to the divine determination. In the priority of the Gospel over the Law in the

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<sup>188</sup> IV/1, 253.

<sup>189</sup> IV/3, 179-180.

<sup>190</sup> Webster, *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 65. Dealing with Roberts’ criticism of Barth’s view of the empirical and the ontological, Webster correspondingly writes that “[T]he objection is so all-encompassing and its rejection of Barth’s fundamental principles so complete that it is, indeed, hard to know how to proceed,” *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 88.

<sup>191</sup> Gorringer, *Against Hegemony*, 173 n.35.

<sup>192</sup> III/4, 41. Schwöbel notes that “[T]he reality of God determines the necessity and the possibility of knowing God - ‘ontically and noetically’, ... and in this order,” in “Theology,” 30.

<sup>193</sup> III/2, 135-136.

<sup>194</sup> IV/2, 270, emphasis in the original text.

Word of God, however, no matter how much the self-determination of the ethical agent is perverted by her sinfulness, it is for Barth the grace of God which triumphs, and the ethical agent remains irrevocably a creature of God.



## **§6 Human Action and Divine Action**

*God rules in and over a world of freedom.* - Barth<sup>1</sup>

This chapter examines the description of human freedom and the relationship between divine action and human action in the *Church Dogmatics*. In this description, Barth tries to find a theological position that avoids the dangers both of determinism and of synergism,<sup>2</sup> admitting in the process that “it is not at all easy to give either to oneself or to others a reasoned account of the fact or extent of the divine co-operation with the creature.”<sup>3</sup> The first section below considers Barth’s account of human freedom in the *Church Dogmatics*, while the second section examines Barth’s doctrine of the *concursum Dei*. The third section proceeds to analyse the doctrine of baptism as a case study of this *concursum*, before the fourth section considers its Christological grounding. Finally, the adequacy of Barth’s account of human freedom in the *concursum* is briefly appraised.

### **A - the freedom of the ethical agent**

This section proceeds in two parts: it considers first the concept of true human freedom, before turning second to examine the concept of sinful human unfreedom.

#### *i) true human freedom*

For Barth, human freedom is “the most profound and comprehensive aspect of the real man.”<sup>4</sup> In the true positive sense of the word freedom, of course, it is only God who is free.<sup>5</sup> By comparison, human freedom is something derivative and relative,

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<sup>1</sup> III/3, 93.

<sup>2</sup> III/3, 113-115.

<sup>3</sup> III/3, 97.

<sup>4</sup> III/2, 195.

<sup>5</sup> II/1, 307. For Barth, God is free even in regard to God’s freedom, II/1, 303. Barth states that “[I]n all its possibilities and shapes it remains the freedom which consists and is exercised in Jesus Christ,” II/1, 320. Barth correspondingly writes that “the freedom of God, as His freedom in Himself, His primary absoluteness, has its truth and reality in the inner Trinitarian life of the Father with the Son by the Holy Spirit,” II/1, 317. For the importance of this Trinitarian and self-giving dimension to the

something, writes Barth, “which we cannot acquire for ourselves and which can and actually is given us only by God, because He alone is originally free.”<sup>6</sup> In terms of its basis and origin, Barth writes of the individual that “[T]o be free, he must be born again by God’s Word and Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> This has two implications for the ethical agent: first, it is not in herself that she is free, but only in Jesus Christ;<sup>8</sup> and second, it is not by her own activity but by that of the Holy Spirit that she is awakened to freedom.<sup>9</sup> Barth therefore construes human freedom actualistically: it is not a freedom which the ethical agent has of herself,<sup>10</sup> or one which she has taken,<sup>11</sup> but a gift from the divine mercy that is “continually to be received as such, and only as such.”<sup>12</sup>

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divine freedom, see Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 106-107. In light of this, as Lienemann notes, “[R]adical autonomy’ can no longer (*nicht einmal mehr*) be predicated of God, because God has determined Godself - out of freedom and in love - to be the covenant partner of the creatures,” in “Das Gebot Gottes als ‘Ereignis’,” 169. The view that Barth had posited the ‘radical autonomy’ of God was originally advanced by Trutz Rendtorff in *Theorie des Christentums* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1972), 161-181. For an excellent critique of this view, see Dietrich Korsch, “Christologie und Autonomie: Zu einem Interpretationsversuch der Theologie Karl Barths,” in *EvTh* 41 (1981), 161-170.

<sup>6</sup> III/2, 194. Barth argues that the freedom of the individual for God “cannot be explained from man’s side if we mean to hold fast to the answer prescribed in the Bible,” I/2, 205. Instead, Barth writes, “in his knowledge, obedience and invocation man is himself and acts in freedom because God is first free in relation to Him,” III/2, 193.

<sup>7</sup> IV/3, 447.

<sup>8</sup> IV/1, 101. Barth writes of Jesus Christ that “on both sides freedom is the form and character of the intercourse between true God and true man,” IV/3, 381, and moreover, that “the freedom which is the form and character of this intercourse has nothing whatever to do with chance or caprice,” IV/3, 382. By contrast, Barth writes that “the liberation of the Christian consists quite simply in the fact that what has taken place for all men in Jesus Christ becomes the concrete determination of his own existence and the dominating factor in his own life history,” IV/3, 662-663. He asserts that the power of Christ “does not operate only in the fact that this freedom is as it were proffered to us from without, or commended and laid on our hearts as a freedom which is also possible for us, but rather that it is actually made our own,” IV/2, 305. Thus Ulrich Hedinger is right to note that “[C]orrectly understood, the teaching on freedom in the *Church Dogmatics* is nothing other than the unfolding of the divine act of freedom in Jesus Christ,” *Der Freiheitsbegriff*, 197.

<sup>9</sup> IV/3, 941. Barth writes that it is the power of the Holy Spirit that “is the power of our liberation accomplished already in the freedom of Jesus Christ: our liberation from the compulsion of continuing in our disobedience now that the Son of God has humbled Himself to be one of us and to be obedient in our place; and our liberation for a life as the brother of that royal and exalted man,” IV/2, 311-312. The work of the Holy Spirit in revelation is thus one which bestows “freedom, freedom to have a Lord, this Lord, God, as Lord,” I/1, 457. Yet it is important to remember that “the creature to whom the Holy Spirit is imparted in revelation by no means loses its nature and kind as a creature,” I/1, 462. Instead, it is the case that “[T]hrough the Spirit it becomes really possible for the creature, for man, to be there and to be free for God,” I/2, 199. Barth concludes that “they are permitted and commanded to call him their Father. To this freedom the Holy Spirit frees them,” *TCL*, 93. In view of this strong and consistent pneumatological emphasis, it is difficult to agree with Gunton that in Barth “there is insufficient weight given ... to the reality and distinctive functions of the Spirit,” in “The triune God and the freedom of the creature,” 64.

<sup>10</sup> *TCL*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> I/2, 258.

<sup>12</sup> I/2, 697. The Christian therefore has “to seek afresh each new day and hour the freedom which he has and uses,” IV/2, 942. Therefore, for Barth, the liberation of the Christian is an event which is

For Barth, it is not only in terms of its basis and origin, but also in terms of its content, that human freedom is a “particular, true and exclusive freedom.”<sup>13</sup> In the event of the divine gift of freedom, there is genuine freedom of choice, however this is “not ... between two possibilities, but between his one and only possibility and his own impossibility.”<sup>14</sup> The freedom which is given to the ethical agent is thus more than simply the absence of limits, restrictions, or conditions.<sup>15</sup> Instead, it is positively defined in terms of the freedom of the ethical agent properly to correspond to her own election by in turn electing God in faith.<sup>16</sup> The freedom given by the Holy Spirit is thus “the freedom to appropriate as our own conversion the conversion of man to God as it has taken place in Jesus Christ ... ; the freedom, therefore, to set ourselves in the alteration accomplished by Him.”<sup>17</sup> Barth consequently writes that

... the freedom of man does not really consist - except in the imagination of the invincibly ignorant - in the fact that, like Hercules at the cross-roads, he can will and decide. ... Freedom is not an empty and formal concept. It is one which is filled out with a positive meaning. It does not speak only of a capacity.<sup>18</sup>

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always “just commencing and not in any sense complete,” IV/3, 673. However this freedom and liberation is actually given by God - Barth writes that “[W]ithout this assumption there would be no such thing as Christian ethics even for us,” IV/2, 532.

<sup>13</sup> III/2, 95.

<sup>14</sup> III/2, 197. Barth writes that “[T]he free God elects and wills. The free man must elect and will what God wills and elects,” *TCL*, 29. Only in this corresponding election (and accompanying prayer) does the ethical agent achieve and possess “individuality and autonomy before God,” II/2, 180.

<sup>15</sup> II/1, 301.

<sup>16</sup> II/2, 180.

<sup>17</sup> IV/2, 304-305. With regard to conversion, Barth suggests that “[I]f it does not belong to our freedom to put ourselves in this position [that of conversion], it is none the less our freedom which we exercise in this freedom,” I/2, 364. Barth remains clear of the divine priority in conversion, writing of “the compulsion (*das Müssen*) of a permission and ability which have been granted. It is that of the free man who as such can only exercise his freedom,” IV/2, 578, *KD* IV/2, 654. Barth generally differentiates this positive compulsion of Christ to righteousness (*das Müssen*) from the negative compulsion to sin and disobedience, for which he uses cognates of the word *der Zwang*, for example at IV/2, 532, *KD* IV/2, 602 and IV/2, 311-312, *KD* IV/2, 348. Indeed, Barth stresses that “[T]here can be no question of an act of compulsion (*Zwangsgewalt*) on the part of this Lord,” IV/3, 528, *KD* IV/3, 607. Where Barth uses the term *Zwang* with positive intent, he tends to do so in a qualified manner - for example, to refer to the way in which God “in a sense (*gewissermaßen*) compulsorily (*zwangsläufig*) places in the freedom of obedience which we owe Him as His covenant partners,” IV/1, 33, *KD* IV/1, 34. The qualification here, as Hedinger rightly notes, is that the compulsion in question is not physical, sacramental, or ethical in nature, but results from the love of God, *Der Freiheitsbegriff*, 90.

<sup>18</sup> IV/2, 494. Indeed, Barth writes that Jesus Christ rejects and renounces as impossible “the idea of the pagan *liberum arbitrium*, which is illusory because it contests the one true reality, and which ... makes man equal to God, the judge between good and evil, a Hercules at the crossroads,” IV/4, 162. While Hercules at the crossroads may in itself represent something of a ‘straw man’, it nevertheless serves as a profound rhetorical device to emphasise the radically different theocentric concept of human freedom that Barth is advocating. Johnson correctly notes that “[O]ften we assume that true

Hence the freedom of the individual cannot be viewed as a neutral human capacity,<sup>19</sup> but is rather “his freedom to decide for God; for what God wills to do and be for him in this history.”<sup>20</sup> This freedom of justification and sanctification and vocation is the only possible freedom: “everything else called freedom is unfreedom.”<sup>21</sup>

In line with Barth’s actualistic ontology, the Christological and pneumatological determination of the ethical agent in the covenant of grace directs her to *actualise* her freedom: her freedom in Jesus Christ is a freedom to which she is chosen and called,<sup>22</sup> a freedom which only exists in her exercise,<sup>23</sup> in her correct use of it.<sup>24</sup> Barth therefore writes that

... it is not merely a question of man’s static but of his active responsibility before God. [I]f his being in this responsibility has the character of freedom, then freedom too means the *actualisation* of this responsibility - the *event* of his knowledge of God, his obedience to Him and his asking after Him.<sup>25</sup>

Freedom is not only a gift, but also a task, one which “demands of us that we finally act on our own decision - our very own, the one which corresponds to our determination.”<sup>26</sup> To this end, the work of the Holy Spirit is to indicate to the ethical

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freedom means freedom to choose x or y, what philosophers call the freedom of deliberation, or contrary choice. Freedom for Barth, however, means something altogether different. To be mired in deliberating among contrary choices is not freedom at all but bondage,” *The Mystery of God*, 59. By contrast, Barth asserts of the individual that “[W]hat is given him, and required of him, is the freedom of one who belongs to the free God and is freed by Him. ... It is a matter of the freedom of God’s covenant-partner, creature, child and servant elected by Him. It is a matter of the freedom to elect Him as elected by Him. It is a matter of the freedom of responsibility to Him,” IV/3, 447.

<sup>19</sup> III/2, 131. Barth continues: “[I]f man has his being in the Word of God, he can only do that which corresponds to the Word of God. ... if we are to understand human life as a possibility of choice between the right and the left, then it is no longer clear how far his being can subsist in the Word of God, since if the divine Word is the basis of his being, this neutrality is excluded,” III/2, 131.

<sup>20</sup> III/2, 74. William Werpehowski wisely warns against an excessive individualism at this point, writing: “Creaturely freedom is freedom for the good of a history of relationship with God. But the human creature in his or her own sphere of activity with other humans should reflect and correspond to this destiny as covenant partner by living with others in fellowship,” in “Karl Barth and politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 234.

<sup>21</sup> *TCL*, 22. It is thus rather unguarded for McLean to assert that in the work of Barth, “the ordinary meaning of freedom as choice among options, or freedom as self-determination, is affirmed,” *Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth*, 45.

<sup>22</sup> II/2, 587.

<sup>23</sup> III/2, 195.

<sup>24</sup> IV/2, 495. As Wolf Krötke notes, therefore, receiving and submitting is not the end of the activity of the ethical agent for Barth: “[T]he partner of God is in her life thus first a receiver and thence a doer,” in “Gott und Mensch als ‘Partner’,” 166.

<sup>25</sup> III/2, 195, emphases added.

<sup>26</sup> II/2, 595. For Barth, true self-determination thus comes about when “God is honoured by the creature in harmony with God’s pre-determination instead of in opposition to it,” II/1, 674. Barth writes that “it is in his own most proper freedom that he has been determined for God, it is in his own



agent the manner of her new freedom, to warn her of the possibilities excluded by that freedom, and to instruct her in its true possibilities.<sup>27</sup>

True human freedom has here a twofold importance: on the one hand, it is a freedom *from* the accusation of sin, the curse of guilt, and consequent bondage and death; on the other hand, it is a freedom *for* thankfulness, service and joy.<sup>28</sup> At the heart of this actualistic construal of the freedom of the ethical agent there lies again the conception of the Word of God as both Gospel and Law. In contrast with all other commands, the distinguishing feature of the command of God is that in its call to obligation, “it is permission - the granting of a very definite freedom.”<sup>29</sup> Barth writes that “the command of God is the law of the gospel, which shows itself to be authentic by the fact that always ... it is the form of the grace that summons man to freedom.”<sup>30</sup> Hence as the command of God goes forth in the Church, it will “always set us free along a definite line.”<sup>31</sup> As Barth notes,

[W]ithout depriving the human element of its freedom, its earthly substance, its

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most proper freedom that he has decided for God,” II/2, 553. Her determination from Jesus Christ is thus for Barth the “only ultimate and really serious determination for the believer, I/2, 313. Webster observes that for Barth, freedom is ... “a way of describing certain acts as acts in which we are truly ourselves as we correspond to what we have been made in Christ,” *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 114. Aside from this determination, Barth asserts that the only possibility for the ethical agent is that of non-being, III/2, 188, for “in any other freedom man would in some sense be stepping out into the void and could only forfeit and lose himself,” III/2, 194. As Colin Gunton notes, then, “unless it is God who determines us, we are under the power of a demon, not the truth,” in “The triune God and the freedom of the creature,” 52.

<sup>27</sup> IV/2, 362. For Barth, therefore, “[I]f freedom is under the Word, the possibility is precluded that it will become emancipation, arbitrariness or self-assertion,” I/2, 698. By contrast, Barth writes that the Holy Spirit “drives the children of God into the freedom which as such is real obedience,” II/2, 605.

<sup>28</sup> II/2, 30.

<sup>29</sup> II/2, 585. Richardson writes that “Barth’s tendency is to speak about the freedom of a liberated human being in Christ, in the sense of being freed from the bondage of false faith and sin rather than in the freedom of constructive, positive action,” *Reading Karl Barth*, 211, and quotes Barth asking “[I]s there any humanity more free or autonomous or proud than that of the men after God’s own heart who according to their own confession experienced the divine activity towards them without any will or response at all on their own part?,” on III/3, 148. However, it should be noted that in this passage, Barth immediately continues by stressing the corresponding role of human *activity* - the Law - as he asks, “[I]s it not the case that such men ... were activated by this experience in a way which we cannot explain by any other liberation than that which brought them so absolutely under the lordship of God? ... That He is the Master in all things does not alter the fact that each is allowed to develop in its own activity. On the contrary, the rule and disposition of God consists in the very fact that each may and can do that,” III/3, 148.

<sup>30</sup> *TCL*, 36. Hunsinger notes that “freedom is the logical precondition of obedience, even as obedience is the spontaneous expression of freedom,” *How to Read Karl Barth*, 213.

<sup>31</sup> II/2, 586. This determination is explicitly tied to the witness of Scripture, for Barth asserts that “[T]he true freedom of man ... consists in this following of the God who at all times precedes us all in Holy Scripture, and in adherence to the action which He takes by Scripture,” I/2, 673.

humanity, without obliterating the human subject, or making its activity a purely mechanical event, God is the subject from whom human action must receive its new and true name.<sup>32</sup>

This is the key to the conception of the Word of God as both Gospel and Law: the content of the Word of God is the good news of the gift of human freedom; the form of the Word of God is the command to use this freedom appropriately.<sup>33</sup>

*ii) sinful human unfreedom*

Throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth draws a sharp conceptual distinction between true freedom and the sinful use of free will: between that “ambiguous freedom of the creature, for which sin and therefore bondage to fate are not impossible,”<sup>34</sup> and “the freedom in which man will no longer be a sinner or the slave of any fate.”<sup>35</sup> This distinction is critical for the construal of human freedom in the *Church Dogmatics* and thus merits further exploration.

For Barth, the (sinful) free will of the ethical agent is not true human freedom but only an *apparent* freedom. He notes that “[W]hat we do as sinners is not done in freedom, but in the greatest unfreedom (*Unfreiheit*).”<sup>36</sup> This unfreedom is “the evil freedom which man in his pride has made for himself and which he thinks he can possess for himself and use for himself.”<sup>37</sup> He writes that this “free will of man (*[D]es Menschen Willkür*) has nothing to do with permission, freedom and joy,”<sup>38</sup> but rather “[I]t is in his free will (*in seiner Willkür*) that he is tricked and tricks himself

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<sup>32</sup> I/1, 94.

<sup>33</sup> II/2, 588.

<sup>34</sup> II/1, 626.

<sup>35</sup> II/1, 627.

<sup>36</sup> II/2, 589, *KD* II/2, 694. The German terms provided in the following paragraphs bring out a feature of the original text which has been lost in the translation. While the word “free will” is used in the English translation in both pejorative and favourable contexts, the original text uses different idioms for the two cases. The point of interest here is that *die Willkür* - used by Barth only to describe the sinful free-will - carries with it the important additional connotation of caprice and arbitrariness.

<sup>37</sup> IV/1, 745, *KD* IV/1, 833. The *apparent* freedom of the ethical agent is for Barth, then, “not necessarily nor exclusively the freedom of the man who is free in his relation to God. It may also be the freedom of the man who in virtue of his disobedience is enslaved,” III/2, 95. This *apparent* freedom is not for Barth “creaturely freedom but the freedom of a second god. To claim this kind of freedom would be sin and death for the creature,” III/3, 166.

<sup>38</sup> II/2, 594, *KD* II/2, 660.



out of all this.”<sup>39</sup> Seeking and finding a freedom apart from Jesus Christ, the ethical agent is not truly free at all, but a slave to sin.<sup>40</sup> Barth writes:

[U]nder the domination of all other commands, and therefore under the domination of our own desires and lusts, in the self-will (*Eigenwilligkeit*) in which we subject ourselves to that foreign domination, in the permission which we believe we can and should give ourselves, we are really against ourselves.<sup>41</sup>

In exercising this free will, the ethical agent is ultimately desiring to be like God.<sup>42</sup> Such action is an attempt to grasp an independent individuality or autonomy, which Barth believes could only be devilish in character and belong to evil.<sup>43</sup> Consequently Barth posits that the command of God “sets itself against human free will (*menschlichen Willkür*),”<sup>44</sup> demands the “renunciation of free will (*Willkür*) itself and as such,”<sup>45</sup> and orders the individual to “make use of the real permission at his disposal, to return to his true freedom.”<sup>46</sup> This return to true freedom is effected in the sanctification of the free will in Jesus Christ, in whom, Barth writes, “we ... live as men of the same free will (*desselben freien Willens*), as those who break through that circle, who overcome and conquer our misery, as free men.”<sup>47</sup>

Given the ontic grounding of the ethical agent in Jesus Christ, Barth posits that “sin

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<sup>39</sup> II/2, 594, *KD* II/2, 660. Barth argues that “[W]hen man sins, he has renounced his freedom,” III/2, 197, and that “[H]is sin excludes his freedom, just as his freedom excludes his sin,” IV/2, 495.

<sup>40</sup> II/2, 762.

<sup>41</sup> II/2, 595, *KD* II/2, 661.

<sup>42</sup> II/2, 596-597. This desire embodies precisely Barth’s definition of sin as an action in the misunderstanding and misuse of the Law which “consists in our yielding to the prompting of the desire ... to be like God, to cleanse and justify and sanctify ourselves before God,” II/2, 590.

<sup>43</sup> II/2, 178. By contrast, the autonomy which God does give the creature is one which should not “be possessed outside Him, let alone against Him, but for Him, and within His kingdom; not in rivalry with His sovereignty, but for its confirming and glorifying,” II/2, 178. John Webster observes that “Barth seeks to construct an account of the relation of God and humanity which refuses the antithetical accounts of autonomy and heteronomy, preferring to think of a set of analogical relations between the action of God and human acts,” *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 211. As such, as Gunton notes, human autonomy is a “*given* one, shaped and - if we use the word carefully - determined by God,” in “The triune God and the freedom of the creature,” 51. Barth argues that all other autonomy is delivered up to death by the work of Jesus Christ, II/2, 660.

<sup>44</sup> II/2, 594, *KD* II/2, 660.

<sup>45</sup> II/2, 597.

<sup>46</sup> II/2, 594.

<sup>47</sup> IV/2, 493, *KD* IV/2, 558. In the covenant of grace, Barth writes that “[W]e have to understand our own free will (*unseren eigenen freien Willen*) by faith in God’s grace revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and therefore to understand its freedom as freedom by grace, under grace, and for grace, II/1, 585, *KD* II/1, 660. In this position of grace, the ethical agent is able by her gratitude to make a proper use of “the freedom of the will (*Willensfreiheit*),” II/1, 586, *KD* II/1, 661, and the resultant obedience is genuinely “our free will (*unser freier Wille*),” II/1, 219, *KD* II/1, 247. Barth notes that “[T]he man who could decide otherwise, the man who has another freedom, is not real man,” III/2, 95.

is made for man an ontological impossibility.”<sup>48</sup> He states boldly that “[T]o be in sin, in godlessness, is a mode of being contrary to our humanity.”<sup>49</sup> Barth explains that

[I]t is not really of necessity, but only in fact, that human nature wills to sin, and does sin, and therefore can sin. We are in self-contradiction in this capacity, in our *posse peccare*. It is not our genuine freedom, our *liberum*, but our *servum arbitrium*, that we choose evil. It means an alienation not only from God and our neighbour but also from ourselves. We do not act freely, but as those ‘possessed,’ when we do wrong.<sup>50</sup>

This leads to the seemingly paradoxical situation, wherein “[W]e are already free in Jesus, but we think and speak and will and act and behave as if we were not free.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Barth notes that this sin of deciding not to make use of true freedom “can be described only as a freedom not to be free - which is nonsense.”<sup>52</sup>

Even though sin is an ontologically impossible self-contradiction, Barth openly acknowledges that both godless people and sin itself do exist.<sup>53</sup> And part of the reason for this eventuality is that in the exercise of her faculties, the ethical agent “as a free subject is plainly treated with utter seriousness by God.”<sup>54</sup> Barth writes that “[C]onstantly there will be the arbitrary decision and judgment of Hercules at the cross-roads instead of the simple Yes and No of children of God who choose the will of their Father.”<sup>55</sup> Wolf Krötke explains that for Barth:

[A] person can and must really decide for him- or herself. God has given time and space in this world for this to take place. But a person can and must decide rightly in face of the fact that he or she must also say ‘no’ to disobedience. If, however, the human chooses what is false - that is, the negation of the electing God - then in doing so he or she simultaneously destroys the freedom which God has granted.<sup>56</sup>

At each point, the ethical agent makes her own free and self-determining decisions within the sovereignty of the divine decision.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the character of her

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<sup>48</sup> III/2, 146. For Barth, therefore, “[T]here is absolutely no place for disobedience, unbelief, impenitence,” II/2, 779, indeed “[E]vil becomes for us the absolutely excluded possibility that it is for God Himself,” II/2, 779.

<sup>49</sup> III/2, 136.

<sup>50</sup> IV/2, 93.

<sup>51</sup> IV/2, 367.

<sup>52</sup> IV/2, 495. This sin is nonsense for Barth in the sense that - like sin in general - it “has no basis either in God or in man himself by which it can be explained,” IV/2, 495.

<sup>53</sup> III/2, 136.

<sup>54</sup> III/4, 23.

<sup>55</sup> IV/4, 204.

<sup>56</sup> Krötke, “Karl Barth’s anthropology,” 164.

<sup>57</sup> II/2, 633. Indeed, Barth asserts that “[S]ince the Fall, to exist as human being means to exist in decision,” I/2, 702. And Barth is clear that “[M]an is a subject of his own decision,” III/2, 396. However, if the decision is to sinful free will and not to true human freedom, then clearly the

free decisions is determined by God even as the decisions are made. Barth states that it is the use of her freedom which “is subjected to the prior divine decision - the decision of the question whether it is right or not.”<sup>58</sup> Faced by the judgement of God, the ethical agent is confronted by a decision which relates only to her own free decisions.<sup>59</sup> It is precisely here, Barth writes, that the fallenness of the individual is disclosed, “as God maintains His command against him, and therefore judges him.”<sup>60</sup>

## **B - the relationship between human action and divine action**

With this construal of human freedom and unfreedom in mind, the question arises as to how Barth describes the relationship between divine determination and human self-determination, and thus between human action and divine action. Barth writes that it is the doctrine of the *concursum Dei* which attempts to describe and elucidate “the lordship of God in relation to the free and autonomous activity of the creature.”<sup>61</sup> The key to this relationship lies in Barth’s declaration that “the co-existence of God and man as it occurs in the experience of God’s Word is not a co-existence on the same level.”<sup>62</sup> This section considers Barth’s presentation of the *concursum Dei* first in respect of the unity and second in respect of the distinction between human action and divine action, before a third section explores the theological foundations of this presentation of the *concursum*.

### *i) action in unity*

Barth’s doctrine of the *concursum Dei* is founded on the fact that “[T]he history of the covenant of grace accompanies the act of the creature from first to last.”<sup>63</sup> This means that God “inevitably and inescapably accompanies the creature, no matter what may

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individual “has decided against his freedom to be genuinely man,” IV/2, 495. In this vein, Barth writes of true human freedom that “there is no question of misuse - only of use or non-use,” IV/2, 367. For Barth, then, the Fall has unquestioningly not deprived the ethical agent of her freedom.

<sup>58</sup> II/2, 633-634.

<sup>59</sup> II/2, 634.

<sup>60</sup> II/2, 734.

<sup>61</sup> III/3, 90.

<sup>62</sup> I/1, 200. It is therefore, according to Barth, “impossible to see it from a higher vantage point and to view it in its possibility,” I/1, 200.

<sup>63</sup> III/3, 92.

be the attitude which the creature adopts towards Him.”<sup>64</sup> This actualistic accompanying has three discernible forms. First, God precedes human action, “as the One who has already loved it, who has already undertaken to save and glorify it, who in this sense and to this end has already worked even before the creature itself began to work.”<sup>65</sup> Second, God accompanies human action, as God “works simultaneously in all the supremacy and sovereignty of His working.”<sup>66</sup> And third, God follows human action, for God “will still be at work in relation to this work, when the creature and its work have already attained their goal.”<sup>67</sup>

This trivalent action of God is specified in two particularly significant ways. First, Barth states that “it is God who effects creaturely occurrence, that is, He is the living basis of its occurrence as such, and the living basis of its order and form.”<sup>68</sup> Barth writes of an explicit *co-operatio Dei* with the creature, such that

He co-operates with it, preceding, accompanying and following all its being and activity, so that all the activity of the creature is primarily and simultaneously and subsequently His own activity, and therefore a part of the actualisation of His own will revealed and triumphant in Jesus Christ.<sup>69</sup>

Clearly, this divine conditioning of human action “has to be differentiated from all other forms of ordination or determination which may underlie creaturely activity.”<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, Barth writes that as the divine activity is fulfilled in and with and over that of the creature, so “we have to understand the activity of God and that of the creature as a single action.”<sup>71</sup> Second, and consequently, the divine conditioning of human action in this trivalent form means that “nothing can be done except the will of God.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, Barth can agree with the Reformed proposition concerning the relation between God and the creature that “it is absolutely the will of God alone which is executed in all creaturely activity and creaturely occurrence.”<sup>73</sup> This

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<sup>64</sup> III/3, 92.

<sup>65</sup> III/3, 119.

<sup>66</sup> III/3, 132.

<sup>67</sup> III/3, 151.

<sup>68</sup> III/3, 132.

<sup>69</sup> III/3, 105.

<sup>70</sup> III/3, 121.

<sup>71</sup> III/3, 132.

<sup>72</sup> III/3, 113. Thus God “directs it [the creature] to the thing which in accordance with His good-pleasure and resolve, and on the basis of its creation, it has to do and to be in the course of its history in time,” III/3, 155. This indicates for Barth the irreversibility of the concept of *concursus*, III/3, 112.

<sup>73</sup> III/3, 115.

assertion of the sovereignty of God over all creaturely activity is unequivocal.

*ii) action in distinction*

The above insistence on the unity of divine action and human action might seem to leave little scope or purpose for human action or human will. However, Barth simultaneously strongly affirms the activity of the creature in the *concursum*, based on his exegesis of Scripture. He argues that

[T]o understand the *concursum divinum* ... in a Christian sense as the sovereign act in which the will of God is unconditionally and irresistibly fulfilled in the activity of the creature, we have not to begin with empty concepts but with concepts which are already filled out with Christian meaning.<sup>74</sup>

For Barth, then, the covenant of grace as fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ is the only theologically valid source of information about the *concursum*. On the one hand, this means that the only way in which one can know that the divine activity accompanies that of the creature with so great a superiority is that “[W]e have listened to the Word of grace in which God has Himself revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.”<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, however, this Word of grace also affirms to the individual that God “is over us in a way which corresponds to this election of grace, to this eternal ‘for us’ in His Son.”<sup>76</sup> It is in Jesus Christ, Barth writes, that “God works in the specific event which forms the centre and meaning and goal of all creaturely occurrence.”<sup>77</sup> And it is in the history of Jesus Christ that there occurs

... the fatherly lordship of the Creator; the childlike obedience of the creature; and the Spirit in whom both take place together. At this point there is *actualised* in its original form the fact that the activity of the creature along the way on which God accompanies it and it can accompany God is simply a confirming of the divine activity.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> III/3, 117. He correspondingly asserts that “Christian theology ... does not first consider the creature and its activity in general, then work out a concept of the supreme being, then confer upon this being the name of God, and then conclude that there may perhaps be an activity of God in and above the activity of the creature. On the contrary, it first knows the activity of God in a particular cosmic action in which God has made Himself known,” III/3, 141. To fail to do this leads, for Barth, to the will of God becoming enmeshed in caprice, obscurity or tyranny, with the consequent outcome of human resignation or revolt, III/3, 113-114.

<sup>75</sup> III/3, 109.

<sup>76</sup> III/3, 29.

<sup>77</sup> III/3, 142.

<sup>78</sup> III/3, 94, emphasis added. This is an important point in Barth’s actualistic ontology: that the ethical agent “can see *actualised* in Jesus Christ both the lordship of God and the subordination of the creature,” III/3, 241, emphasis added. Barth writes that “the God who in Jesus Christ is active by His Word and Spirit ... is the One who is and works only in the one way, who works always and



The freedom of the creature is not only noetically revealed, but is also ontically constituted *and* telically directed in the election of Jesus Christ.<sup>79</sup>

The free and eternal election of grace thus, for Barth, *intrinsically* constitutes “a simple but comprehensive autonomy of the creature.”<sup>80</sup> This simple autonomy of the creature is grounded in the eternal election of humanity in Jesus Christ, in which event there begins “the history, encounter and decision between Himself [God] and man.”<sup>81</sup> Therefore the true freedom of the ethical agent is guaranteed by and in the very *identity* of the God who surrounds her activity. However, since the activity of this God “is the activity of grace, its almightiness does not in any sense destroy the free activity of the creature.”<sup>82</sup> And thus the rule of this God, the God of the covenant of grace, “cannot be described as obscure or capricious, nor can the creaturely activity which occurs under the divine lordship be thought of merely as an effect.”<sup>83</sup> This God does not will in his foreordination to constrain or humiliate or weaken the creature.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, by contrast, Barth notes that

... if the supremacy of this work is the supremacy of the Word and Spirit it does not prejudice the autonomy, the freedom, the responsibility, the individual being and life and activity of the creature, or the genuineness of its own activity, but confirms and indeed establishes them.<sup>85</sup>

Therefore even under the lordship of God, “the rights and honour and dignity and

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everywhere as there revealed,” III/3, 143. Barth posits that “existence in this relation is the existence which is to be truly desired, an existence in the highest possible freedom and felicity,” III/3, 241-242.

<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the *concursus* is rooted in the eternal election of grace to such an extent that Carl Heinz Ratschow correctly states that “[T]he teleology of the whole can also be described as arche-ology,” in “Das Heilshandeln und das Welthandeln Gottes,” in *NZST* 1 (1959), 56.

<sup>80</sup> II/2, 177.

<sup>81</sup> II/2, 177.

<sup>82</sup> III/3, 118.

<sup>83</sup> III/3, 118.

<sup>84</sup> III/3, 130.

<sup>85</sup> III/3, 144. Barth’s doctrine of the *concursus* is thus explicitly Trinitarian. First, Barth demands that in the *concursus*, “there must be a clear connexion between the first article of the creed and the second,” III/3, 105. Second, Barth emphasises also the importance of the third article, noting that the *concursus* “is an operation in the Word and therefore by the Spirit, in the Spirit and therefore by the Word. If we perceive this and say it, then we stand within the Christian and Trinitarian conception of God, and we are on firm ground,” III/3, 144. Recognising the role of the work of the Spirit is thus essential to understanding the *concursus Dei* as Barth conceives it. He writes that “[T]he work of the Holy Spirit ... is to bring and to hold together that which is different and therefore, as it would seem, necessarily and irresistibly disruptive in the relationship of Jesus Christ to His community, namely, the divine working, being and action on the one side and the human on the other, the creative freedom and act on the one side and the creaturely on the other, the eternal reality and possibility on the one side and the temporal on the other,” IV/3, 761.



freedom of the creature are not suppressed and extinguished but vindicated and revealed.”<sup>86</sup> Ultimately, the very fact of the *concursum Dei* itself indicates that God “affirms and approves and recognises and respects the autonomous actuality and therefore the autonomous activity of the creature as such.”<sup>87</sup> There thus remains alongside the activity of God a place for that of the creature.<sup>88</sup>

### *iii) theological foundations of the concursus*

The key theological move which renders this doctrine of the *concursum* coherent is the contention of Barth that divine action and human action cannot be brought together and compared as if they were two species of the same genus.<sup>89</sup> Barth writes simply that “the difference in the potencies at work [the divine and the human] carries with it an irreversibility in the order of precedence and dignity of the divine and human activities.”<sup>90</sup> The operation of God is therefore “absolutely above the

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<sup>86</sup> III/3, 145.

<sup>87</sup> III/3, 92.

<sup>88</sup> III/3, 92. Barth writes that “we have to think of the majesty and absoluteness and irresistibility of the divine activity as the confirmation and continually renewed basis of the singularity of the creature to whom God is gracious, and of its worth, and independent activity,” III/3, 118. Thus the creature is subject to God precisely “in the autonomy in which it was created, in the activity which God made possible for it and permitted to it,” III/3, 93. This view of autonomy is thus theocentrically circumscribed: on the one hand, Barth writes that God reveals Godself “in willing and recognising the distinct reality of the creature, granting and conceding to it an individual and autonomous place side by side with Himself,” II/2, 178; on the other hand, he immediately stresses that “the individuality and autonomy [of the creature] are only of such a kind as His own goodness can concede and grant,” II/2, 178. This conception of autonomy is therefore radically different on each count to those Enlightenment construals of autonomy in which the ethical agent is self-determining in an unqualified and autarchic way. It was with such a definition in mind that Barth writes that “[I]n the interval between the ascension and the second coming the believer is certainly responsible, but not autonomous,” I/2, 693, and that “[T]he doctrine of the autonomy of the free creature over against God is simply the theological form of human enmity against God’s grace, the theological actualisation of a repetition of the fall,” II/1, 586. By contrast, what can truly be described as autonomy from below can for Barth be described from above as theonomy, I/2, 857, for it is “the theonomy of God which wills and decrees as such the autonomy of man,” II/2, 180. This means for Barth that the creature “in its autonomy ... recognises and acknowledges that it is wholly and utterly responsible to God,” II/2, 121. George Hunsinger correctly notes that what comes into question for Barth is not the (empirically-evident) actuality of human autonomy or freedom or self-determination, but “the condition for the possibility of human autonomy, freedom, and self-determination,” *How to Read Karl Barth*, 205. That condition, for Barth, Hunsinger finds “entirely in divine grace,” *How to Read Karl Barth*, 206. Barth correspondingly writes that the doctrine of the *concursum* must avoid impersonal concepts of mechanical or automatic causality, III/3, 101, and must focus instead on the grace of God, for “there can be no doubt that with an autonomous reality God does give to man, and not only to man but in different ways to all His creatures, the freedom of individual action,” III/3, 87.

<sup>89</sup> III/3, 102.

<sup>90</sup> III/3, 108. This absolute distinction in potency is rooted for Barth in love: “[T]he love of God is primary. The creature can only be loved by God, and then at best love Him in return,” III/3, 107.

power of the creature,"<sup>91</sup> being "not merely done after a higher and superior fashion, but within a completely different order."<sup>92</sup> This means that in the *concursum Dei*, "there remains a genuine antithesis which is not obscured or resolved either by admixture or transference, either by divine influence or infusion."<sup>93</sup> There is thus distinction even within the unity. Barth maintains that the activity of the creature is still free, contingent and autonomous, but notes that

God controls the activity in its freedom no less than its necessity. The control of God is transcendent. Between the sovereignty of God and the freedom of the creature there is no contradiction. The freedom of its activity does not exclude but includes the fact that it is controlled by God. It is God who limited it by law and necessity and it is God who created it free.<sup>94</sup>

Within this antithetical context, Barth concludes emphatically that "the activity of the creature over against that of God remains the creature's own."<sup>95</sup>

Barth deems the understanding of the *concursum* to be a spiritual matter of faith rather than an intellectual matter of comprehension.<sup>96</sup> The key to its understanding lies for Barth in overcoming that particular fear-complex which suggests

... that God is a kind of stranger or alien or even enemy to the creature; that it is better for the freedom and claim and honour and dignity of the creature the more it can call its own a sphere marked off from God and guaranteed against Him, and worse for it if this sphere is restricted, and worst of all if it is completely taken away; that it may be and necessarily is a legitimate interest to defend the claim of the creature in face of an

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<sup>91</sup> III/3, 107.

<sup>92</sup> III/3, 135. Barth writes that "[A]n awareness of the supremacy of God over all the power of the creature, of the qualitative distinction between divine and creaturely potency, of the irreversibility of the order of precedence in divine and creaturely activity, must be brought into play and relentlessly kept in play at this juncture," III/3, 111.

<sup>93</sup> III/3, 136.

<sup>94</sup> III/3, 165-166.

<sup>95</sup> III/3, 149. Barth writes that in relation to God, the reality of the character and dignity of the creature, "its individuality as a creature, are safeguarded in the mere fact that He confirms His relation to it and its relation to Him," III/3, 165. For Barth, the same holds for the activity of the community, which is placed by the power of God "in the freedom of a definite, genuinely human and spontaneous thought, volition, decision and activity in which it is created, nourished and sustained by it as an active subject," IV/3, 786. Consequently, John Webster writes that "Barth is seriously at odds with a theory of human action which would make what human beings do a mere extension, emanation or even mediation of what God does: ethical docetism is ruled out of order, and the place of the acting person secured," *Barth's Moral Theology*, 169. Jüngel notes in an ontological connection that for Barth, "[A]nalogy guards the difference between God and humanity as it emphasises as acutely as possible their partnership," *Barth-Studien*, 319.

<sup>96</sup> III/3, 146. The *concursum Dei* is for Barth a case *sui generis* and "can never be perceived within the framework of a general philosophy," III/3, 140. Rather it must be *revealed* as "the secret of grace," III/3, 136, and is therefore "not an assertion but a confession of the divine operation," III/3, 142. As Webster correspondingly notes, "right judgement in the matter of human freedom is *spiritual* in character," *Barth's Moral Theology*, 102-103.

unjustified and dangerous claim on the part of God.<sup>97</sup>

It is this fear, which is rooted in sin, that makes it “so hard to grasp that the freedom of creaturely activity is confirmed by the unconditioned and irresistible lordship of God.”<sup>98</sup> By contrast, John Webster notes correctly that for Barth there is nothing “gained by insisting on human moral autonomy that cannot also and more effectively be secured by a careful unfolding of the content of the drama of God’s covenantal dealings with us.”<sup>99</sup> Any paradox exists at the level of human language and creaturely noesis only, for Barth is clear that a contradiction is perceived here only “as long as hazy notions prevail concerning who or what we mean by God, as long as we answer the question in another way than the Christian.”<sup>100</sup> It is just at this point that Terry J. Wright lapses back into a mechanical concept of causality, writing that Barth’s doctrine of the *concursum* “emphasizes God’s lordship over creation to such a severe degree that we may doubt, and reasonably so, that the divine activity establishes creaturely freedom in the way he insists.”<sup>101</sup> Such a construal seems to remain at the level of a causal *either-or* which sees the lordship of God in competition with human freedom. By contrast, Barth sees no rivalry between divine freedom and human freedom,<sup>102</sup> and writes that in the covenant of grace,

God’s sovereignty is not like that of a tyrant. In his exercise of it, he does not disregard the service of his children but pays it free and - what is in his judgment - proper regard. Yet in fact he never lets the reins slip from his fingers.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> III/3, 146. Barth writes that “[W]e must divest ourselves of the idea that limitation implies something derogatory, or even a kind of curse or affliction. ... Limitation as decreed by God means circumscription, definition, and therefore determination. ... it is precisely in this way that he finds himself fully affirmed and taken seriously by God,” III/4, 567. Indeed, affirms Barth, “[T]he man who is limited by Him is the man who is loved by Him,” III/4, 568. Webster observes that “[M]uch of Barth’s rhetoric is devoted to exorcizing the demon which inhibits our perception of God’s freedom as a liberating power,” *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 103.

<sup>98</sup> III/3, 147.

<sup>99</sup> Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 8.

<sup>100</sup> III/3, 188.

<sup>101</sup> Terry J. Wright, “Reconsidering *Concursum*,” in *IJST* 4.2 (2002), 210. Wright argues that “[W]e have already seen that for Barth *concursum* is God’s accompanying of the creature in its activity, but in his later volumes of *Church Dogmatics* he adopted a position that was nearer to our participatory approach. Here, Barth says that the Christian’s ‘free action as servant consists in the fact that he accompanies his sovereign Lord in His action, assisting, seconding and helping Him’ (CD IV/3/2, p.602),” in “Reconsidering *Concursum*,” 213 n. 39. However, in endeavouring to leave behind the notion of the lordship of God found in III/3, Wright fails to notice that in the previous sentence in IV/3, Barth himself writes that the ethical agent “is free only to obey and serve Him, just as the Lord is free and sovereign to claim, accept, direct, and approve his service,” IV/3, 602.

<sup>102</sup> IV/2, 753.

<sup>103</sup> *TCL*, 105-106. Barth consequently posits that “[B]y God’s free grace these people are not

It is this truth which must be revealed to the ethical agent, and precisely as revelation, in the words of George Hunsinger, it shares in the predicates of “miracle and mystery.”<sup>104</sup> Barth thus resolves the question of paradox in the *concursum*, in the words of Webster, “*descriptively* rather than *theoretically*.”<sup>105</sup> As Barth observes, the concern of the *concursum Dei* is “to find the description which can do justice in our thought and utterance to what we see and hear of the divine operation.”<sup>106</sup>

## C - a case study of divine action and human action

Having analysed the nature of human freedom and the ordered relationship between divine action and human action in Barth’s doctrine of the *concursum*, it is insightful to follow these analyses through into an archetypal case study - Barth’s doctrine of baptism. In what follows, the doctrine of baptism is first sketched out, and then evaluated in light of the doctrine of the *concursum*.

### i) the doctrine of baptism

The doctrine of baptism which Barth expounds is renowned for its clear and careful distinction between the divine act of baptism with the Holy Spirit and the human act of baptism with water.<sup>107</sup> For the purposes of the current analysis, it is the human act

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marionettes who move only at his will. They are given the status of subjects who are able and willing to act, able and willing to do what is appropriate to them in dealing with him, able and willing to call upon him,” *TCL*, 102. Barth writes that the sovereignty of the love of God “did not will to exercise mechanical force, to move the immobile from without, to rule over puppets or slaves, but willed rather to triumph in faithful servants and friends,” II/2, 178. This sovereignty is one grounded in the divine election of grace. Therefore, as Gorringe notes, “[T]he objection that Barth minimizes human freedom, or even disallows it altogether, fails to understand that Barth is speaking of the reality of grace,” *Karl Barth Against Hegemony*, 193. In a similar way, Hunsinger notes that “[P]aradoxically, ... although befalling us from the outside and exceeding our creaturely capacities, the event of grace deeply enhances rather than diminishes us. ... The sovereignty of grace is thus not the negation, but the condition for the possibility, of human spontaneity and fulfillment. God’s sovereignty in our lives is enacted as God establishes with us a history of love and freedom,” *How to Read Karl Barth*, 31.

<sup>104</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 202.

<sup>105</sup> Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 101-102. In other words, Barth overcomes the paradox “not by the construction of a better set of terms for the problem than those offered by primary Christian language, but by the opposite - by disciplined description of Christian discourse, normatively found in Holy Scripture,” *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 102.

<sup>106</sup> III/2, 142.

<sup>107</sup> IV/4, 102. The distinction between, yet co-ordination of, this baptism with the Holy Spirit (the divine action) and this baptism with water (the human action) is clearly affirmed by Barth, IV/4, 41. McDowell laments that there is here no suggestion of Christ “working mediocrally ... through the element[s] of water in baptism,” *Hope in Barth’s Eschatology*, 233. It might be argued in response,

of water baptism which is of greater relevance to the understanding of the *concursum*.

For Barth, baptism with water is a free human decision,<sup>108</sup> which “corresponds to the divine turning to man.”<sup>109</sup> This concept of correspondence is vital to understanding the thought of Barth. He explains that in water baptism, the action of the individual

... is not superhuman or supernatural. It is genuinely and truly human correspondence to the legal claim which God asserts over against him in His work and word. One has even to say that all pseudo-human masks fall away, and truly human action is evident ... . It is human action which simply responds to divine action. Nevertheless, it does so in an appropriate way. It reflects this action. It is thus a pre-eminent human action.<sup>110</sup>

The individual requesting to be baptised therefore “does it as his own work ... for which he is freed and awakened, and to which he is summoned, by the mighty demonstration of God’s faithfulness to him.”<sup>111</sup> Barth is therefore clear that “we have here a free action on the part of all those concerned.”<sup>112</sup>

At the same time, however, the doctrine of the *concursum* would contend that precisely *within* the human act of water baptism, we have in some way to do a divine action as well. The *concursum* would posit that the human action of water baptism is in no way independent of divine action. The alternative would be to suggest that the human action of water baptism *is* in some way independent of divine action, and thus drive a rift between the doctrine of the *concursum* and the doctrine of baptism. John Macken has taken this step, arguing that in this doctrine of baptism, “human action and man’s autonomy are given a distinction and a solidity new in Barth’s thought.”<sup>113</sup> For Macken, not only is it the case for Barth that there is an inalienable distinction

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that there is no suggestion that this cannot or does not happen and that if one is adequately to preserve the freedom of God, there can be no guaranteed divine presence in the sacraments. To complain of possible “docetism” at this point, as Paul Molnar does, *Karl Barth and the Theology of the Lord’s Supper* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 305, seems to fail to acknowledge the distinction between the one sacrament of Jesus Christ and the commanded ecclesial practices of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The humanity of Jesus Christ is the only element in creation to which God is irrevocably bound, by virtue of the eternal decision of God’s will. By contrast, while within the actualistic ontology of Barth, God can bind Godself to the Church, Scripture, preaching, baptism, or the Lord’s Supper, as Molnar wishes, *The Theology of the Lord’s Supper*, 305, there can be no objective sense in which God is bound to them in substantialistic terms. God remains veiled even in revelation.

<sup>108</sup> IV/4, 36.

<sup>109</sup> IV/4, 102.

<sup>110</sup> IV/4, 143.

<sup>111</sup> IV/4, 44.

<sup>112</sup> IV/4, 131-132. It is for Barth a “wholly free, conscious and voluntary decision,” IV/4, 163.

<sup>113</sup> Macken, *Autonomy*, 86. In passing, it is simply astonishing that Macken ventures this judgement without ever referring either to the doctrine of the *concursum Dei* in particular or to III/3 in general.



between the divine act and the human act in water baptism, but it is also true that a human action must axiomatically be distinct from a divine action.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, Macken quotes Barth to support his case at this point - “[I]f ... it is basically a divine action, how can it be understood and taken seriously as a human action?”<sup>115</sup> The question arises, therefore, as to the consistency of the theology of Barth at this point between the doctrine of baptism and the doctrine of the *concursum*.

*ii) the doctrine of baptism and the doctrine of the concursum*

It was seen above that for Barth in the *concursum Dei*, divine action and human action, like their respective agents, are utterly incomparable. Barth writes of the theological impossibility of a study of the two realities of God and humanity as though they were on the same plane,<sup>116</sup> and posits that “the absolute unlikeness of the two *causae causantes* should be brought into sharp relief.”<sup>117</sup> As Ulrich Hedinger notes, “in the *Church Dogmatics*, the work of God and the work of the individual do not happen on the same level.”<sup>118</sup> Barth correspondingly writes that:

God, who as such is the *auctor primarius* of all creaturely occurrence, is specifically in the word and work of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit the free Lord of the action of the community which bears witness to Him, and therewith of its baptism too.<sup>119</sup>

The human causality in water baptism and the divine causality in water baptism do not work mutually to exclude the other, for *all* creaturely activity finds its locus within the context of the divine activity. Indeed water baptism is true and genuine human action precisely as it corresponds to the accompanying and empowering divine action. Barth asserts that “[W]ithout this unity of the two in their distinction

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<sup>114</sup> Macken, *Autonomy*, 86.

<sup>115</sup> Macken, *Autonomy*, 82, quoting, IV/4, 106. Macken seems to miss the true point of Barth asking this question, which is to reject a *sacramental* interpretation of baptism, in which it might be contended that “God were acting in the place of men and men in the place of God,” IV/4, 106. Far from there being an axiomatic disjunction of divine action and human action, Barth asks in the same paragraph, “[H]ow could baptism ... be a true answer if the action of God were not present and did not precede and follow it in His work and word?,” IV/4, 106. Water baptism is thus a true and free human action precisely in the *concursum*, where the divine action of God precedes, accompanies, and succeeds the free action of the ethical agent.

<sup>116</sup> I/2, 790.

<sup>117</sup> III/3, 103.

<sup>118</sup> Hedinger, *Der Freiheitsbegriff*, 20.

<sup>119</sup> IV/4, 105.



there could be no Christian ethics.”<sup>120</sup> The divine action and the human action within water baptism are thus distinct and yet co-ordinated.

This coincidence of divine action and human action is in seeming contrast with the contention of Macken that there is here an “axiomatic disjunction between God’s act and man’s,”<sup>121</sup> and the unguarded statement of Jüngel that baptism with water is an “exclusively human deed.”<sup>122</sup> That God is the *auctor primarius* of all creaturely action does not attenuate for Barth the meaningfulness of human action. Rather Barth demands that “the omnicausality (*Allwirksamkeit*) of God must not be construed as His sole causality (*Alleinwirksamkeit*).”<sup>123</sup> Divine sole causality would render the creature a mechanical automaton, performing the divine will of necessity yet devoid of freedom. However, Barth writes that

[I]n his free grace God purges himself from the base suspicion that he is an unchangeable, untouchable, and immutable deity whose divine nature condemns him to be the only one at work (*Alleinwirksamkeit*).<sup>124</sup>

Therefore within the divine omnicausality in general, and the doctrine of baptism in particular, it is the case that the creature can exercise “a free and responsible choosing and rejecting, affirming and negating, a human decision.”<sup>125</sup>

In the doctrine of baptism, as in the *concursum*, this possibility of human freedom is grounded in the covenant of grace. Barth asserts the noetic and ontic and telic

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<sup>120</sup> IV/4, 41.

<sup>121</sup> Macken, *Autonomy*, 80.

<sup>122</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 258.

<sup>123</sup> IV/4, 22, *KD* IV/4, 25. Barth thus explicitly affirms the omnicausality of God, as he carefully outlines in II/2, 526–528. Barth later seems to contradict this view: “[P]recisely in the covenant of grace ... there can be no talk of divine omnicausality,” IV/4, 163, emphasis added. Indeed, Hunsinger quotes this text as evidence for his Chalcedonian interpretation of the *concursum*, in *How to Read Karl Barth*, 212. However, the translation here is in error. The original text reads: “[G]erade im Gnadenbund ... kann und darf doch von einer Alleinwirksamkeit Gottes nicht die Rede sein,” *KD* IV/4, 180, thus a consistent translation would read, “[P]recisely in the covenant of grace ... there can be no talk of divine sole causality,” emphasis added.

<sup>124</sup> *TCL*, 102, *DcL*, 167.

<sup>125</sup> IV/4, 163. In this context of omnicausality and of the divine *gubernatio*, it seems strange for Mangina to argue that the language of correspondence and the *analogia fidei* “firmly excludes the coincidence of divine and human agency,” *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 87 n.17. It seems rather that the very notion of a *concursum Dei* involves a co-incidence of divine action and human action: the key is the appropriate conception thereof. Failure to see this leads Nicholas Healy to accuse Barth of bifurcating the Church in his doctrine of baptism, in “The Logic of Karl Barth’s Ecclesiology: Analysis, Assessment and Proposed Modifications,” in *MT* 10.3 (1994), 263, although Healy later reconsiders this criticism, in “Karl Barth’s ecclesiology reconsidered,” in *SJT* 57.3 (2004), 287–299.

centrality of Jesus Christ, writing that

He is ... the Lord who has freed and continually frees these men for this ministry, for keeping His commandments, for grasping His promise. Hence his action within and on them, His presence, work and revelation in their whole action, and therewith in their baptism, does not supplant or suppress their action. It does not rob it of significance.<sup>126</sup>

Barth acknowledges in the *concursum* that this covenantal foundation “does not offer any solution at all to the technical problem raised,”<sup>127</sup> but asserts that it offers something far greater and better - “the fact of a relationship between the Creator and His creatures, between His and their freedom, which is still clear and positive in spite of the existence of this problem.”<sup>128</sup> And therefore with reference once more to baptism, Barth writes that any construal of that event would be artificial if it was “obscured or denied that the founding of the Christian life is an event in the genuine intercourse between God and man as two different partners.”<sup>129</sup> Clearly, the relationship between divine action and human action remains as asymmetric in baptism as in the *concursum*. Barth asserts that water baptism

... is not, then, an autonomous decision. It is a free and responsible human act, but as such it simply follows the justification and sanctification, the cleansing and renewal of sinful man which God has accomplished and revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>130</sup>

In the covenant of grace founded in Jesus Christ, God “wills and creates man as a partner who is capable of entering into covenant-relationship with Himself.”<sup>131</sup> It is therefore the case for Barth that the ethical agent in the act of water baptism is taken seriously by God, and is “not engulfed and covered as by a divine landslide or swept away as by a divine flood.”<sup>132</sup> In the covenant attested by this baptism, then, “we find dialogue and dealings between two who stand in clear encounter, God on the one side and man on the other.”<sup>133</sup> The doctrine of baptism and the doctrine of the

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<sup>126</sup> IV/4, 105-106. Barth is very sensitive to the accusation of Christomonism, in respect of which he writes, “we must not be misled by even a sound christocentric intention into thinking or speaking thus, or even in this direction. Indeed, a true Christocentricity will strictly forbid us to do so,” IV/4, 19.

<sup>127</sup> III/3, 189.

<sup>128</sup> III/3, 189.

<sup>129</sup> IV/4, 19.

<sup>130</sup> IV/4, 159.

<sup>131</sup> III/1, 185.

<sup>132</sup> IV/4, 163.

<sup>133</sup> IV/4, 163. There is thus in the covenant “true intercourse between God and man,” IV/4, 22, for “the two stand in genuine confrontation and the relationship between them can and must be a history,” III/3, 27. Hunsinger notes indeed that for Barth, “God without humanity and humanity without God are conceived as abstractions that do not really exist in the sense that they have no ultimate reality,” *How to Read Karl Barth*, 154.

*concursum* in Barth thus stand in profound continuity.<sup>134</sup>

## D - critical analysis of ethical action

The conceptualisation of human freedom in the *Church Dogmatics* has given rise to much scholarly discussion and critique of Barth. The following sections offer first a brief presentation of the key line of this criticism, and then a more detailed response.

### *i) criticism of this ethical agent*

The greatest criticism levelled against the construal of human freedom in the *Church Dogmatics* is that the freedom which it attributes to the ethical agent is illusory. Barth writes, for example, that the individual

... cannot seek refuge in a separate freedom of choice and control respecting his own being, action and conduct which still remains to him alongside the choice and control for which he is empowered and to which he is also invited and ordered by God. ... The only way open for him is ... that of the decision of obedience.<sup>135</sup>

On the one hand, then, the ethical agent is set free by the grace of God; on the other hand, she is compelled to obedience by the authority of the command of God. As Barth summarises, the God of the covenant in encounter with the individual has “freed and bound him to do His will.”<sup>136</sup> Hence, as Wolf Krötke observes, the most common criticism of Barth’s anthropology is to ask “Can an obedient person ... actually be a free partner?”<sup>137</sup> This question is also raised by Biggar, who argues that Barth proposes a ‘compatibilist’ account of human freedom in which “human beings are *determined* to choose what is right ... [which] yields a notion of human freedom that is more apparent than real.”<sup>138</sup> Webster suggests that in modern thinking, by contrast, the freedom of the individual is perceived as “a free-standing, quasi-absolute reality which both characterizes and validates the unique dignity of the

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<sup>134</sup> This work therefore follows that of Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 291-292, Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth*, 206, Hütter, *Evangelische Ethik als kirchliches Zeugnis*, 92, and Spencer, *Clearing a Space for Human Action*, 247, in finding the doctrine of baptism in the final volume of the *Church Dogmatics* to represent a natural unfolding of and to lie in profound material continuity with the earlier volumes. This view is contested by Macken, *Autonomy*, 86, by Thomas Torrance, as referenced by Webster, *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 171, and at least partly by Webster himself, *Barth*, 157.

<sup>135</sup> IV/4, 36.

<sup>136</sup> III/3, 315.

<sup>137</sup> Krötke, “Gott und Mensch als ‘Partner’,” 166.

<sup>138</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 5.

human person.”<sup>139</sup> This kind of conception finds an irresolvable paradox between freedom and obedience in the work of Barth in respect of the life of the ethical agent.

*ii) a defence of this ethical agent*

There does indeed seem to be a certain sense of paradox or tension in the way human freedom and human obedience is construed in the *Church Dogmatics*. However, in the moral ontology with which Barth works, any trace of paradox at this point is merely apparent. The Word of God reveals Jesus Christ as the paradigm of true freedom-in-obedience and obedience-in-freedom: Jesus Christ “lived as a man in this true human freedom - the freedom for obedience - not knowing or having any other freedom.”<sup>140</sup> In Jesus Christ, therefore, “free God and free man meet and are one,”<sup>141</sup> and “the identity of authority and freedom is accomplished.”<sup>142</sup> For Barth, it is the case that if the Word of God is the point of departure, then the antithesis of freedom and authority is in fact left far behind. He therefore argues that “[W]e can no longer play off freedom against authority or authority against freedom,”<sup>143</sup> for instead, “authority must necessarily be interpreted by freedom, and freedom by authority.”<sup>144</sup> Barth writes that

... the grace of the origin of Jesus Christ means the basic exaltation of His human freedom to its truth, i.e., to the obedience in whose exercise it is not superhuman but true human freedom.<sup>145</sup>

This understanding, in which the antithesis of freedom and obedience is left behind, is thus grounded firmly - both noetically and ontically - in Jesus Christ. The identity of authority and freedom in Jesus Christ subsequently becomes normative for the ethical agent.<sup>146</sup> As the being-in-act of the ethical agent is grounded in the being-in-act of Jesus Christ, so too the freedom of the ethical agent is noetically and ontically, formally and materially, grounded in the freedom of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>139</sup> Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, 112.

<sup>140</sup> IV/2, 93.

<sup>141</sup> IV/3, 383.

<sup>142</sup> II/2, 606.

<sup>143</sup> I/2, 665.

<sup>144</sup> I/2, 666.

<sup>145</sup> IV/2, 92.

<sup>146</sup> II/2, 606.

The Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ thus “involves the dislodging of man from the estimation of his own freedom, and his enrichment with the freedom of the children of God.”<sup>147</sup> In the freedom of the children of God, there is for Barth no paradox in stating that the command of God “imposes freedom on man, just because it sets man free with the obedience which it requires of him, just because it is the command of the grace of God.”<sup>148</sup> Within the covenant of grace, indeed, “it is good for man, it is the best thing possible for man, simply to be God’s possession.”<sup>149</sup> So Barth notes that “[T]he man mastered and compelled is precisely the man whom God loves, who is therefore set upon his own feet and made truly responsible.”<sup>150</sup>

Barth therefore asserts that “[T]he self-enclosed uniqueness of man, who only has and knows his own freedom, is overarched and enclosed and finally relativised through the uniqueness of God and His freedom.”<sup>151</sup> True human freedom is circumscribed by the divine freedom in the covenant in such a way that there can be no infringing upon “either the free disposing of God regarding the concrete meaning and content of his commanding or the free responsibility of the action of man.”<sup>152</sup> Hedinger consequently observes that “[F]or the theologian Karl Barth, freedom is not a rational concept, but neither is it an irrational paradox.”<sup>153</sup> Barth declares:

God is Spirit, and therefore He truly awakens man to freedom. That He causes His divine power to come on him does not mean that he overtakes and overwhelms and

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<sup>147</sup> I/2, 260.

<sup>148</sup> II/2, 596. The language evidences again the way in which Barth construes the Word of God to be at the same time both Gospel and Law, both indicative and imperative. Barth asserts that “[T]he law under which I stand is the law of my freedom, and therefore the law according to which I have to posit myself as the being whom I shall be, choosing the only possibility prescribed and offered me in my knowledge of God,” III/2, 181. The unity and identity of freedom and authority expresses again the unity of Gospel and Law in the one Word of God, and is thus for Hedinger “a Christological-eschatological promise,” *Der Freiheitsbegriff*, 27. Willis perceptively notes in this regard the importance of a dynamic rather than a static view of the Law and of focussing on the necessary response of the ethical agent to this Law, *Ethics*, 164. This reflects clearly Barth’s actualistic understanding of the covenant of grace.

<sup>149</sup> II/2, 581.

<sup>150</sup> I/2, 662. As Hunsinger correctly notes, the compulsion of grace is conceptually instrumental to Barth’s account of human freedom, in *How to Read Karl Barth*, 210-211.

<sup>151</sup> I/2, 260.

<sup>152</sup> *TCL*, 4. Wolf Krötke posits in this regard that “[I]t is a fundamental feature of the *Church Dogmatics*, which cannot be overlooked, that the human being in his own decision and in his responsible action is taken eminently seriously,” in “Gott und Mensch als ‘Partner’,” 161. Jüngel similarly notes the importance of human freedom for Barth, arguing that “Barth has called for God to be conceived in such a way that it is freedom and joy which correspond anthropologically to the concept of God,” *Barth-Studien*, 339.

<sup>153</sup> Hedinger, *Der Freiheitsbegriff*, 125.



crushes him, forcing him to be what He would have him be. He does not dispose of him like a mere object. He treats him, and indeed establishes him, as a free subject. He sets him on his own feet as His partner. He wills that he should stand and walk on his own feet. He thus wills that he should believe and love and hope.<sup>154</sup>

Consequently, true human freedom is “freedom for that which is commanded by God as God empowers him for it.”<sup>155</sup> For the individual, then, living under the Word of God, “does not mean any cancellation of his independence, selfhood and freedom,”<sup>156</sup> but precisely as submission and obedience, it is “also freedom, human spontaneity and activity, human dignity and action.”<sup>157</sup> Within the covenant of grace, it is thus for Barth “a matter of the obedience of the free man to the free God,”<sup>158</sup> for “God’s freedom does not compete with man’s freedom.”<sup>159</sup>

It is clear that in this moral ontology which Barth posits, the values and expectations of the kind of moral Cartesianism that has prevailed in much modern ethical reflection are turned upside down. For Barth, human freedom is utterly circumscribed by the covenant of grace, prompting Webster to note that “[T]he vocabulary of formation, direction, indication and limitation points to the radically anti-modern character of Barth’s understanding of freedom.”<sup>160</sup> Hence for Barth, as

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<sup>154</sup> IV/3, 941-942. Barth rhetorically asks, “[H]ow could it be the freedom of the divine mercy bestowed on man, if it suppressed and dissolved human freedom?,” I/2, 365. Thus Barth stresses that the individual “has to cleave freely to this free God. Freely, for God’s sovereign grasping of man is not an act of force to induce a *sacrificium intellectus et voluntatis*. On the contrary, it evokes and establishes the *intellectus* and the *voluntatis fidei*,” IV/3, 447. Barth notes that obedience to God is itself freedom, for “obedience is choice and decision, although it is essentially a choice and decision in which the obedient man surrenders his own power to Him whom he obeys,” I/2, 670.

<sup>155</sup> IV/4, 34.

<sup>156</sup> III/2, 142.

<sup>157</sup> I/2, 699. It is not merely that the created will of the ethical agent does not lose its character as a will or its freedom because it is effected by God: on the contrary, the created will actually gains its character and its freedom for this very reason, II/1, 560. Therefore Barth writes that “the creaturely will based on and governed by God’s knowledge and will is a real will and therefore free and responsible in itself,” II/1, 578. This follows from the fact that God “is not omnipotent in a way which threatens and destroys the independence of His creature. As Spirit, He is omnipotent in the freedom of His creatures,” II/1, 598. Consequently, Barth is adamant that human freedom in Jesus Christ is a real occurrence, insisting that “as men may lift up themselves they acquire and have here and now, in all their lack of freedom, a freedom to do this of which they avail themselves,” IV/2, 554.

<sup>158</sup> II/2, 561.

<sup>159</sup> I/2, 365. McDowell correctly notes, “[H]uman and divine freedoms are here presented in a co-operative, rather than competitive manner,” *Hope in Barth’s Eschatology*, 138.

<sup>160</sup> Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 115, although the use of the term ‘anti-modern’ is not unproblematic. Webster refers to the conviction of Barth that “the meaning of a term like ‘freedom’ is to be filled out by depiction of the events of the history of the covenant rather than by formal or by abstract considerations,” *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 102. This highlights the fact that Barth is describing the moral ontology which he finds revealed in the Word of God, and is not aiming to



Macken observes, “[W]hat can be affirmed is not sovereign or absolute autonomy, or autarchy, but a relative autonomy which stands in relationship to Revelation.”<sup>161</sup> Within this actualistic ontology, the working concepts of divine providence - permission and obligation, freedom and command - are no longer value-neutral or abstract terms, but are instead to be defined exclusively in relation to the covenant of grace revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>162</sup> In this context, Barth stresses that

... cannot be equated with neutrality but is capable of only the one positive meaning that it is freedom which is exercised in the fulfilment of responsibility before God. ... It is certainly freedom of choice. But as freedom given by God, as freedom in action, it is the freedom of a right choice.<sup>163</sup>

As a result, Willis notes that, for Barth, “[P]ermission and obligation, freedom and command, can be (and are) united only in the decision of faith in the Word of God given in Jesus Christ.”<sup>164</sup>

There is clearly a deep incommensurability between Barth on human freedom and certain modern views of human freedom, whether within or outwith the Church. Barth, who always seems more concerned by intra-ecclesial error than its secular counterpart, thus opposes what he finds in the liberal Protestant view of freedom, which regards the inmost depths of the being and experience of the individual as final reality and highest law. Of it, he simply demands, “what has all this to do with

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present a systematically adequate or empirically verifiable account of human freedom.

<sup>161</sup> Macken, *Autonomy*, 54. However, as Barth notes, “we have the absolute autonomy of God on the one side and the relative autonomy of the creature on the other,” III/2, 321. To preserve the actualistic intent of Barth, then, the autonomy in question would be more helpfully described by Macken in terms of a relationship to the Revealer than to the Revelation. Barth himself writes that while the ethical agent as an existent being has independence, “[I]t is a creaturely and therefore not an absolute independence,” III/4, 330. David Fergusson therefore seems to go too far in suggesting that “[H]uman autonomy is generally excluded by Barth because of its inevitable association with a synergism or semi-Pelagianism that will compromise the sovereign grace of God,” in “Will the Love of God Finally Triumph?,” in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 195. Human autonomy is unequivocally affirmed by Barth, albeit in circumscribed form. What is excluded is autarchy, for, as Barth warns, “[T]he more autarchy there is, the more dangerously we skirt the frontier of inhumanity,” III/2, 262.

<sup>162</sup> III/3, 113. Macken notes Barth’s intention to subsume the life and activity of the ethical agent “under the categories of knowledge and of correspondence to and witness to divine Revelation,” *Autonomy*, 85, and registers the corresponding efforts “throughout the *Church Dogmatics* to conceive of the human subject in its distinctness and reality without departing for an instant from the primacy of the divine subject and the absolute claims of grace,” *Autonomy*, 160.

<sup>163</sup> III/2, 196-197.

<sup>164</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 175. Hedinger notes that the unity of freedom and necessity does not lie in any historical existence or human spirit, but is a unity gifted in the freedom of Christ in the Holy Spirit, *Der Freiheitsbegriff*, 233. Webster correspondingly remarks that true freedom is thus “consent to a given order of reality which encloses human history,” *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 112.

the real evangelical freedom of the children of God?"<sup>165</sup> An evaluation of the criticism of Barth at this point is ultimately rendered highly problematic by the fundamentally irreconcilable assumptions of the two perspectives. For neo-Protestantism, freedom represents a neutral capacity enabling the making of decisions: for Barth, freedom does not speak only of a capacity. For neo-Protestantism, freedom is the ability to make one from a number of possible choices: for Barth, freedom is the ability to make the one and only possible choice. For neo-Protestantism, freedom is an innate attribute of the ethical agent: for Barth, freedom is an actualistic gift of God. A judgement of the success or otherwise of Barth's construal of human freedom on this point will finally come down to whether or not one accepts Barth's starting-point in the Word of God.<sup>166</sup>

## E - summary

Barth's doctrine of the *concursum divinum* creates a very clear space for human action, but one which is importantly circumscribed. At its Christological heart there is a distinct relativisation of human action and human freedom in respect of divine freedom and divine action.<sup>167</sup> For Barth, the activity of the creature can take place only under the determination and limitation appointed to it and is therefore

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<sup>165</sup> I/2, 668.

<sup>166</sup> There exists a further criticism of Barth's concept of human freedom pertaining to the eschaton, which can only be treated briefly here. In light of Barth's leaving open the possibility of an *apokatastasis*, II/2, 417-418, Biggar suggests that Barth's concept of freedom ultimately "raises questions about the graciousness of a grace that does not concede to the beloved the freedom to turn away permanently," *Hastening*, 5. Fergusson therefore argues that "[W]hat is required is a stronger account of freedom in which the human creature is granted space in which to accept or reject divine love," in "Will the Love of God Finally Triumph?," 195. The underlying issue is whether the affirmation that God must ultimately respect a sinful eschatological use of human freedom is necessary for a genuine account of human freedom: in other words, whether holding open the possibility of *apokatastasis* is intrinsically detrimental to a construal of human freedom, and if so, whether a genuine account of human freedom must explicitly deny this possibility. These are not questions which Barth explicitly answers. However, three brief observations might be made at this point: first, Barth asserts that "the activity of the creature does not impose any conditions upon the activity of God," III/3, 113; second Barth posits that "[M]an exists only in his relation with God," III/2, 123, and therefore, "[H]e cannot reverse his election and calling, which are not his own work but God's," *TCL*, 184; and third, construing the love of God to be maximised in respecting the wish of the sinner to turn away seems a highly anthropological and non-scriptural move. At a point where all human conceptions tend towards theological irreifiability, it would therefore seem both unwise and unnecessary to exchange Barth's eschatologically open position for a rigidly closed one.

<sup>167</sup> III/3, 170.

subordinate even in its autonomy.<sup>168</sup> However, in the covenant of grace grounded in Jesus Christ, God and the ethical agent on the one hand, and divine freedom and action and human freedom and action on the other hand, are not of the same genus but exist in ordered relationship. In this order, Barth writes,

... in their own way, and at their own time and place, all things are allowed to be, and live, and work, and occupy their own sphere, and exercise their own effect upon their environment, and fulfil the circle of their own destiny.<sup>169</sup>

In the covenant, therefore, "the freedom of creaturely activity is neither jeopardised nor suppressed, but rather it is confirmed in all its particularity and variety."<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> III/3, 106.

<sup>169</sup> III/3, 148.

<sup>170</sup> III/3, 146.



## §7    The Way of Ethical Action

*Jesus Christ ... is the image to which we have to conform ourselves. - Barth<sup>1</sup>*

At the start of his general ethics in the *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth writes that:

[T]he summons of the divine predecision, the sanctification which comes on man from all eternity and therefore once for all in the election of Jesus Christ, is that in all its human questionableness and frailty the life of the elect should become its image and repetition and attestation and acknowledgement.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter examines the sanctification of the ethical agent, considering how the life of the ethical agent can become this image and repetition and attestation and acknowledgement of the election of Jesus Christ. It proceeds in three parts. First, the way in which the action of the ethical agent conforms to Jesus Christ is examined. Second, certain aspects of this conformity are considered: its limitations, its reality, and its different spheres. Finally, the actualistic nature of ethical agency is analysed.

### **A - the content of conformity**

Given Barth's actualistic ontology, the fundamental Christological analogy between being of the man Jesus and the being of God means also a correspondence between the activity of the man Jesus and the activity of God. Barth writes that in what Jesus Christ "thinks and wills and does, in His attitude, there is a correspondence, a parallel in the creaturely world, to the plan and purpose and work and attitude of God."<sup>3</sup> With the relationship between the man Jesus and other individuals existing in *analogia relationis* to this foundational relationship, there is thereby included a demand for correspondence between the activity of the man Jesus and the activity of the ethical agent. Barth warns therefore that "[I]t is no excessive Puritanism that the constant impulse of the New Testament is towards Christian perfection."<sup>4</sup> The ontic determination of the ethical agent in the election of Jesus Christ calls her to a

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<sup>1</sup> II/2, 737.

<sup>2</sup> II/2, 512.

<sup>3</sup> IV/2, 166.

<sup>4</sup> IV/3, 342.

corresponding ethical self-determination in a life of active responsibility before God.

For the ethical agent to conform herself to Jesus Christ involves living within a circle of first receiving and then responding to the divine grace. Barth writes that the individual “is what he is as a creature, as the man Jesus, and in Him God Himself, moves towards him, and as he moves towards the man Jesus and therefore towards God.”<sup>5</sup> Within this movement, the proper action of the ethical agent can only be understood “in the light of the fact that it may correspond to the divine action in his favour, doing justice to the grace addressed to him.”<sup>6</sup> For Barth, then, conformity means correspondence. The main features of this life in corresponding action are differently enumerated by Barth at various points in the *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>7</sup> In what follows here, the key features of this life in correspondence will be analysed under the headings of faith, obedience, and prayer.

*i) faith*

Barth explicitly poses the question, “what is meant by demanding conformity with divine grace, and to that extent conformity with Jesus Christ and his people?”<sup>8</sup> The ultimate answer which he gives is that “what God wants of us and all men is that we should believe in Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup> By believing in the gracious action of God actualised and revealed in Jesus Christ, the ethical agent has faith, the essence of which is, for Barth, “simply to accept as right what God does, to do everything and all things on the presupposition that God’s action is accepted as right.”<sup>10</sup> Barth thus posits that this faith “is the source of the Christian attitude,”<sup>11</sup> and that it is “the act of the Christian life to the extent that in all the activity and individual acts of a man it is

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<sup>5</sup> III/2, 161-162. For Barth, there is in this circle “a direct and concrete confrontation of the divine and corresponding human action, the former kindling the latter and the latter kindled by it,” IV/3, 546.

<sup>6</sup> III/2, 74.

<sup>7</sup> They are variously listed as: faith, knowledge, and obedience, I/1, 453; as love and praise, I/2, 371; as faith, obedience, gratitude, humility, and joy, II/1, 550; as praying, following, and obeying, II/2, 177; as knowledge, obedience, invocation, and freedom, III/2, 176, 179, 186, 192; as faith, obedience, and prayer, III/3, 246; and as faith, hope, and love, IV/1, 93 and II/2, 574.

<sup>8</sup> II/2, 577.

<sup>9</sup> II/2, 583.

<sup>10</sup> II/2, 583. To have faith in this action is to have confidence “in the kingdom of God in Him, in the uniting of God and man accomplished by Him, in the reconciliation of the world with God actualised by Him, in the fatherhood of God and the sonship of man proclaimed by Him,” III/3, 248.

<sup>11</sup> III/3, 246.



the most inward and central and decisive act of his heart.”<sup>12</sup>

As acknowledgement, faith is for Barth a specific cognitive event, a “taking cognisance of the preceding being and work of Jesus Christ.”<sup>13</sup> As knowledge, however, faith is “not a matter of this or that truth or this or that redemption, but of the person who is Himself truth and redemption.”<sup>14</sup> And thus faith is not only acknowledgement, but recognition.<sup>15</sup> Barth notes that as Jesus Christ encounters the ethical agent and calls her to faith, it is as One whose form is absolutely “determined by His own being and His own revelation of His being ... in the witness of Scripture and the proclamation of the community.”<sup>16</sup> As the ethical agent recognises Jesus Christ in this revelation, she is called forth to confess Him.<sup>17</sup>

On the one hand, faith is here construed as the occurrence of a *divine* gift. Barth is clear that the true source of faith is the Word of God,<sup>18</sup> and that its underlying presupposition is “a creative event - the being and activity of Jesus Christ in the power of His Holy Spirit, awakening man to faith.”<sup>19</sup> As it involves knowledge of God, it is clear that for Barth the individual can only know God “because God declares to him His Word, and therefore first knows him.”<sup>20</sup> Consequently, faith is for Barth “not a determination of human action which man can give to it at will or maintain at will once it is received.”<sup>21</sup> He asserts that “[O]n the basis of our own freedoms and possibilities, we should never acknowledge the Word of God to all eternity.”<sup>22</sup> And therefore Barth argues that faith

... is never something which is there already. It is always a gift which has to be seized again and again. We can have it, and the retrospect and prospect which it gives (and what can truly be called a Christian state of believing), only as it is given to us as a gift,

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<sup>12</sup> IV/1, 757.

<sup>13</sup> IV/1, 758.

<sup>14</sup> IV/1, 745.

<sup>15</sup> IV/1, 761.

<sup>16</sup> IV/1, 762.

<sup>17</sup> IV/1, 776.

<sup>18</sup> III/3, 247.

<sup>19</sup> IV/1, 758.

<sup>20</sup> III/2, 176. There is no *sacrificium intellectus* at this point, however: Barth notes that “[T]here is no more intimate friend of sound human understanding than the Holy Spirit,” IV/4, 28.

<sup>21</sup> I/1, 18.

<sup>22</sup> I/2, 258.

and we grasp it as such.<sup>23</sup>

It is therefore only as the ethical agent is awakened and moved by God, that she can and does believe.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, Barth is unequivocal that faith also, and without prejudicing the above, remains a profoundly *human* action. He asserts that

... if faith understands itself only as a miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit, this does not alter the fact that it has to be undertaken as a conscious and determined act of the man whose being and essence are condemned and rejected in the divine judgment, and whose sinfulness is now forgiven. ... And if it is true that even this act as such - faith as our act - is not without sin, but will appear in the judgment as everywhere spotted with sin, this does not mean that we can neglect it. For the grace of God calls for it.<sup>25</sup>

God calls for human faith because it is in this decision and act that the ethical agent in her self-determination corresponds to and confirms her original divine determination.<sup>26</sup> In the act of faith the individual "can and actually does elect God, thus attesting and activating himself as elected man,"<sup>27</sup> and in this human election of God lies the "purpose and meaning of the eternal divine election of grace."<sup>28</sup> As this true and original human action, faith "is an imitation of Jesus Christ, an analogy to His attitude and action."<sup>29</sup>

Faith for Barth is not a static human possession, but a "human activity which cannot be compared with any other in spontaneity and native freedom."<sup>30</sup> This actualistic construal of faith is demonstrated again when Barth writes that "in faith we always

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<sup>23</sup> I/2, 706.

<sup>24</sup> III/3, 250.

<sup>25</sup> II/2, 767-768. Barth notes that "[A]s a human form of being, a human act and experience, it will always be a profoundly imperfect correspondence, it will always be similar only in the greatest dissimilarity, it will not therefore give to man any glory or merit. ... Yet it cannot be denied that justifying faith is in fact a concrete correspondence to the One in whom it believes, and that if it is not, it is not justifying faith," IV/1, 636. Jüngel notes that "Barth is interested in the fact that where God acts, there also the human being *as agent* is in the picture - precisely in receiving," *Barth-Studien*, 206, emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> I/2, 366.

<sup>27</sup> II/2, 177.

<sup>28</sup> II/2, 178. Barth writes that "[I]n faith, the particular relation and union which God has established on earth between Himself and His people actually attains its goal on the manward side," III/3, 246.

<sup>29</sup> IV/1, 634. Barth explains that "[I]n faith man is in conformity to God, i.e., capable of receiving God's Word, capable of so corresponding in his own decision to the decision God has made about him in the Word that the Word of God is now the Word heard by him and he himself is now the man addressed by this Word," I/1, 240.

<sup>30</sup> IV/1, 741-742.

have to do with a single event, an individual decision, in which I decide in conformity with the decision of the Word of God.”<sup>31</sup> Consequently, faith is “always a gift which has to be seized again and again,”<sup>32</sup> for Barth asserts that “acknowledgement of the Word of God necessarily means letting oneself be continually led, always making a step, always being in movement.”<sup>33</sup> It is thus in the repeated event in which the ethical agent hears and accepts the Word of God that the ethical agent comes to know God.<sup>34</sup> In this movement, faith corresponds to the justification of the ethical agent, and “God accepts it as the human work which corresponds to His work.”<sup>35</sup>

Faith as a human act is characterised for Barth both by gratitude,<sup>36</sup> and by repentance,<sup>37</sup> however perhaps its fundamental characteristic for Barth is humility, as he posits that “[F]aith ... is wholly and utterly humility.”<sup>38</sup> This humility requires that the individual “let his self-understanding in every conceivable form be radically transcended, limited, and relativised by this faith, or rather by the God in whom he believes.”<sup>39</sup> Barth observes that this self-renunciation “can hardly be described as anything but renunciation in favour of the living Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>40</sup> Consequently, he notes that “[F]aith in God’s righteousness means necessarily and essentially a choice and decision in favour of His righteousness and opposed to our own.”<sup>41</sup> Not only does such faith in humility correspond to the recognition and confession of Jesus Christ,<sup>42</sup> but, in its character as a justifying faith, there is here for Barth a genuine *imitatio Christi*.<sup>43</sup> In this way, faith “imitates Jesus Christ in whom it

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<sup>31</sup> I/2, 706.

<sup>32</sup> I/2, 706.

<sup>33</sup> I/1, 207.

<sup>34</sup> III/2, 177.

<sup>35</sup> IV/1, 615. Barth writes that “[A]s this act of obedience faith is a work of the Holy Spirit, and as true faith, and only as such, it is justifying faith,” IV/1, 96. However, this justification is dynamic and not static - it is for Barth the ongoing *event* of the divine pardon of the sinful ethical agent, IV/1, 573.

<sup>36</sup> II/1, 669.

<sup>37</sup> II/2, 768.

<sup>38</sup> IV/1, 618. In view of these three characteristics, it is surprising that John Kelsay asserts that “Barth has little to say concerning the cultivation of certain dispositions that are part of the life of faith,” in “Prayer and Ethics: Reflections on Calvin and Barth,” in *HTR* 82.2 (1989), 178.

<sup>39</sup> III/4, 58.

<sup>40</sup> IV/1, 744.

<sup>41</sup> II/1, 386.

<sup>42</sup> IV/1, 613.

<sup>43</sup> IV/1, 634. Barth explains that “when we call faith humility, the obedience of humility, we say the

believes, it corresponds to Him.”<sup>44</sup>

Barth concludes that “[F]aith is altogether the work of God, and it is altogether the work of man.”<sup>45</sup> For Barth, the free human decision of faith can hold to the Word “because the Word has come to it and made and introduced it as faith.”<sup>46</sup> There is no reciprocity in this action, but a renunciation of all reciprocity,<sup>47</sup> for Barth notes that even in believing, the Christian owes everything to the object of his faith, that is, to Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup> Indeed Barth specifies that “[I]t is the will and decision and achievement of Jesus Christ the Son of God that it takes place as a free human act.”<sup>49</sup> Within the covenant event of faith, then, the Gospel and the Law remain carefully ordered, and there is a clear correspondence between the original divine action and the subsequent human response. Barth summarises that faith is “a question of the confidence awakened by God in which man ... may rely on God as the One who has made, and does and will make, everything right for him.”<sup>50</sup>

## *ii) obedience*

The active responsibility of the ethical agent does not stop at the point of a cognitive faith. Barth states that the Christian lives by faith in hearing the Word, “but only in really hearing it, only in living by hearing it, only in being obedient to it.”<sup>51</sup> Barth therefore argues that “the idea of a purely theoretical faith separable from life can

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most positive possible thing we can say of it as a human form of being, a human act and experience. For in this way it imitates Jesus Christ in whom it believes, it corresponds to Him. ... Faith itself, therefore, becomes ... a human imitation of what God has done for man in this One,” IV/1, 635.

<sup>44</sup> IV/1, 635.

<sup>45</sup> III/3, 247. Barth writes that “[M]an is the subject of faith. Man believes, not God. But the fact that man is this subject in faith is bracketed as a predicate of the subject God,” I/1, 245. George Hunsinger summarises well the actualism present in this statement, writing that “[F]aith has its being in the act of God by which it is evoked as a free human response. Faith does not occur in abstraction from the event in which God gives it, nor in abstraction from the event (the very same event) in which we receive it,” *How to Read Karl Barth*, 68.

<sup>46</sup> I/2, 508.

<sup>47</sup> I/2, 146.

<sup>48</sup> IV/1, 742.

<sup>49</sup> IV/1, 744.

<sup>50</sup> II/2, 237.

<sup>51</sup> III/3, 253. It should be noted in passing that the concept of obedience is at one point used by Barth as a sort of *Oberbegriff* for the total self-determination of the ethical agent in conformity to the command of God, thereby encompassing the theological virtues of faith, love, and hope, IV/1, 111.

only be an absurdity,”<sup>52</sup> and declares that the self-determination of the individual which faith involves is “not an accidental or partial, but a necessary and total, determination of his existence.”<sup>53</sup> Therefore, as it is in the hearing of the Word of God that the ethical agent lives, so too “it must be in obedience to this Word that its being and history is continued.”<sup>54</sup> Barth writes that Jesus Christ “demands faith in the form of obedience; obedience to Himself.”<sup>55</sup> This, then, is the sanctification of the individual - “the claiming of all human life and being and activity by the will of God for the active fulfilment of that will.”<sup>56</sup>

For Barth, an action performed in obedience to God consists not only in the performance of that action, but also in the ethical agent offering herself to God in so doing.<sup>57</sup> Hence as William Werpehowski notes, “the question of obedience to the electing God’s command must coincide *absolutely* with the problem of human behaviour in its totality.”<sup>58</sup> Barth posits that

... ‘to become obedient,’ ‘to act rightly,’ ‘to realise the good,’ never means anything other than to become obedient to the revelation of the grace of God; to live as a man to whom grace has come in Jesus Christ.<sup>59</sup>

And therefore the individual both is and is human “as he performs this act of responsibility, offering himself as the response to the Word of God, and conducting, shaping, and expressing himself as an answer to it.”<sup>60</sup> In this way, the ethical agent finds her self-determination, her spontaneity, and her activity engaged in the service of the Word of God.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> II/2, 767. Barth demands, “how can their Yes, spoken to God’s Yes, be an idle Yes?,” IV/4, 161. And thus for Barth, “[W]here there is faith, there are also love and works,” IV/1, 627. As Matheny notes, Barth “conceives of ethical responsibility as human activity in a unity of knowledge and obedience,” *Dogmatics and Ethics*, 55. It is no coincidence that Barth devotes a whole section of the *Church Dogmatics* (§65) to the *sloth* of the sinner, to “the evil inaction which is absolutely forbidden and reprehensible,” IV/2, 403.

<sup>53</sup> I/2, 366. Barth thus writes that “my decision - the human ethical decision - is whether in my conduct I shall correspond to the command which encounters and confronts me in the most concrete and pointed way, whether I shall be obedient or disobedient to it, whether I, for my part, shall meet it according to my election (the election of Jesus Christ) as a believer or unbeliever,” II/2, 669.

<sup>54</sup> III/2, 165.

<sup>55</sup> IV/2, 537.

<sup>56</sup> IV/1, 101.

<sup>57</sup> III/4, 13.

<sup>58</sup> Werpehowski, “Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth,” 301.

<sup>59</sup> II/2, 539.

<sup>60</sup> III/2, 175.

<sup>61</sup> I/2, 701.



Materially, it is the case for Barth that “[A]s the one Word of God which is the revelation and work of His grace reaches us, its aim is that our being and action should be conformed to His.”<sup>62</sup> In the language of the *imago Dei*, Barth writes that the ethical agent and her action

... should become the image of God: the reflection which represents, although in itself it is completely different from, God and His action; the reflection in which God recognises Himself and His action.<sup>63</sup>

Thus the ethical agent is summoned in obedience to “action which even in its humanity is similar, parallel, and analogous to the act of God himself.”<sup>64</sup> Specifically, Barth posits that right conduct is determined absolutely in the right conduct of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>65</sup> It is the aim of Jesus Christ that “out of man’s life there should come a repetition, an analogy, a parallel to His own being - that he should be conformable to Christ.”<sup>66</sup> Jesus Christ is no impersonal or abstract ideal to which the

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<sup>62</sup> II/2, 512.

<sup>63</sup> II/2, 575. Barth posits that “[W]hat God wills of us is the same as He wills and has done for us,” II/2, 568, and thus that “[A]n active life lived in obedience must obviously consist in a correspondence to divine action,” III/4, 474. Jüngel notes that in this particular sense, “[I]n this dogmatics, obedience corresponds not to a command, but to a good deed,” *Barth-Studien*, 340. Barth notes that “[I]t is in this correspondence ... that fellowship between God and man consists, and therefore God’s love to man reaches its goal,” III/4, 74. The elect individual, according to Barth, is “chosen in order to respond to the gracious God, to be His creaturely image, His imitator,” II/2, 413.

<sup>64</sup> *TCL*, 175. Thus while George Hunsinger may be correct in observing that “[T]he mature Barth always applied the eschatological reservation more stringently to the church’s deeds than to its verbal proclamation,” in “Karl Barth and radical politics: Some further considerations,” in *SR* 7.2 (1978), 172, it is less clear that he is justified in concluding that, for Barth, “the *analogia fidei* found no direct counterpart in an analogy of praxis,” in “Karl Barth and radical politics,” 172. In his doctrine of the *concursus*, Barth writes that inasmuch as the conditioning of another belongs both to divine work and creaturely activity, there is “a similarity, a comparableness, and therefore an analogy between the divine activity and the human. We have to speak of an *analogia operationis*, just as elsewhere we can speak of an *analogia relationis*,” III/3, 102. Johnson wrongly restricts this *analogia* to the relationship between “God’s work in Christ and God’s working in general,” *The Mystery of God*, 94, while Willis fallaciously uses this *analogia* to argue that the distinction between divine action and human action is “relative rather than absolute,” *Ethics*, 194.

<sup>65</sup> II/2, 538. It is thus clear that G. G. de Kruijf is wrong to argue that Barth was missing a “benchmark” (*Maßstab*) for ethical action in II/2, in “Heiligung und Ethik in der Theologie Karl Barths,” in *ZdTh* 2.2 (1986), 373.

<sup>66</sup> I/2, 277. It remains true for Barth in this analogy (and throughout) that the person of Jesus Christ is distinguished “qualitatively as well as quantitatively from all other men,” IV/2, 95. Nevertheless, Barth writes that the believer “has to shape his existence, or, more exactly, his understanding and apprehension of his existence, his attitude to himself and the world, in a way which is in some sense parallel to the One who as his Lord took his place, that he has to model himself in conformity with the One in whom he believes, that he can and will be man only in the likeness of Jesus Christ as the One who died and rose again for him,” IV/1, 769. As she does so in love and obedience, she both realises her own true self-determination and conforms to her determination in Jesus Christ - in short, she becomes what she already is, I/2, 389.



ethical agent has to correspond, but is rather the claim of God upon her in person, a claim which God in Jesus Christ has made and continually makes.<sup>67</sup>

However, as was discerned in the first part of this work, Barth believes that the material conformity to Jesus Christ that is required is not a simple matter of imitating exactly the actions of Jesus Christ described in Scripture. Barth comments that the arbitrariness of all imitation is precisely its weakness, for “what imitation really intends, imitation cannot achieve.”<sup>68</sup> Even less is this material conformity to do with what Barth calls “the maintaining of Christian standards or the setting forth of a Christian way of life.”<sup>69</sup> The true meaning of the *imitatio Christi* is rather an attitude “related in the strictest possible way to the gracious attitude of God to us men revealed and operative in Christ.”<sup>70</sup> The history of Jesus Christ, as the centre of the ‘formed’ reference which underlies every ethical encounter of God and the ethical agent, thus indicates the prominent lines of Christian discipleship. For Barth, these prominent lines include the renunciation of material attachments and social status, the promotion of practical pacifism, the relativisation of family relationships, and the condemnation of false religiosity.<sup>71</sup> These aspects of the attitude of Jesus Christ form the ‘prominent lines’ of the formed reference to which the behaviour of the ethical

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<sup>67</sup> II/2, 567. Barth writes that each individual decision of the ethical agent is a special form, a repetition and confirmation of her original decision for Jesus Christ, II/2, 609. For this reason, it is misleadingly equivocal for Paul Louis Metzger to write that the significance of the constitutive being of Christ for all humanity is “that it functions as an ideal, as the *telos* of humanity to which all humanity is called,” *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 97. Gunton notes more accurately that in the actualistic construal of obedience in Barth, “[W]e are called to obey not the impersonal dictates of reason but one who comes alongside us as one of us,” in “The triune God and the freedom of the creature,” 52.

<sup>68</sup> I/2, 276.

<sup>69</sup> III/3, 254.

<sup>70</sup> II/2, 576. Barth thus posits that “[W]e are to do what corresponds to this grace,” II/2, 576, and that “Christians can look only where they see God looking and try to live with no other purpose than that with which God acts in Jesus Christ,” *TCL*, 266. Jesus Christ is thus “the pattern of Christian existence,” IV/2, 835.

<sup>71</sup> IV/2, 547-552. Barth finds the way in which the man Jesus exists in correspondence to the image of God “in His unpretentiousness in what seems to be His world to human eyes; in His corresponding partisanship of those who are lowly in this world; in the revolutionary character of His relationship to the established orders; in His positive turning to man as he exists and is oppressed in the world,” IV/2, 248-249. Barth earlier posits in a related passage that “[O]ur aim must correspond to the distinctive aim of our Father in heaven, who meets both the good and the evil with the same beneficence. It must be a readiness to forgive one [an]other, to be compassionate, to bear one another’s burdens and to live and help one another. It must be persistent kindness even towards persecutors of the faith. It must be a humility in which we do not look at our own things, but at the things of others. It must be a love which is directed even - and especially - to our enemies,” II/2, 578.

agent is called to correspond.<sup>72</sup>

The final and most decisive prominent line of Christian discipleship is the direction of Jesus Christ to take up one's cross, and thereby to point to God, to the will of God for the world, to the future revelation of the majesty of God, and to the glory in which Jesus Christ already lives and reigns.<sup>73</sup> Barth observes that the ethical agent stands in the shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>74</sup> Included in a true *imitatio Christi*, then, is the need for *mortificatio* and *vivificatio*.<sup>75</sup> Only in correspondence with these aspects of the history of Jesus Christ will her life become and be the *analogatum* - no more but no less - of the *analogans*, the justifying activity of Jesus Christ.<sup>76</sup> Underlying this construal of the *imitatio Christi* lies a crucial epistemological directionality - *from* the act of following Jesus Christ *to* the act of interpreting Scripture. Barth contends that:

[A] realisation of what is meant by taking up one's cross, denying oneself, leaving all, loving one's enemies, etc. cannot lead us to the realisation of what is meant by following Jesus. On the contrary, it is only as we realise what following Jesus means that we can go on to realise the meaning of these concretions as well.<sup>77</sup>

Consequently Barth asserts that standing under the sign and direction of the cross "is not so much a matter of morals as ontology."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> IV/2, 547. Important in this conception of correspondence is the Christologically derived horizontal dimension of human activity. Barth notes that God commands, invites, and challenges the individual "not merely to allow his humanity as fellow-humanity to be his nature, but to affirm and exercise it in his own decision, in action and omission," III/4, 116. Consequently, the individual "may and can and should reflect and practice God's being and acting for man, the distinction with which he treats him, by making man the special object of [his] own interest," *TCL*, 267.

<sup>73</sup> IV/2, 606.

<sup>74</sup> IV/2, 263-264. Barth observes that the conformity of the ethical agent to Jesus Christ will always be reflected in "the pronouncedly revolutionary character of His relationship to the order of life and value current in the world around Him," IV/2, 171. Thus he cautions that "the testimony which has this content will necessarily be an unsettled and unsettling, a suffering and a struggling testimony," I/2, 677, and correspondingly, "none can be a Christian without falling into affliction," IV/3, 618. He observes that "the way of Scripture in the world will undoubtedly and in all circumstances be the way in which the disciples have to bear the cross like their Master," I/2, 680.

<sup>75</sup> IV/1, 772 and 774 respectively. These determinations do not come to the ethical agent only occasionally, but continually, and must therefore be actualised by her continually.

<sup>76</sup> IV/1, 770.

<sup>77</sup> II/2, 569. While it may be true, as Biggar argues, that "Barth deems it inappropriate to characterize the life of God Incarnate by any one of its moments," *Hastening*, 108, the reason for Barth's rejection of earlier construals of the *imitatio Christi*, does not lie here, but rather in how Barth conceives the directionality at this point: by following Christ the ethical agent understands the concepts of self-denial and cross-bearing, and not the other way round.

<sup>78</sup> IV/2, 264.

The activity of obedience does not, however, occur independently of the work of God. Barth writes that

... what the free God in His omnipotence wills and fashions in Jesus Christ in the work of the Holy Ghost is the free man who determines himself under this pre-determination by God, the obedience of his heart and conscience and will and independent action.<sup>79</sup>

Precisely in her self-determination, then, the ethical agent is subject to Christological and pneumatological determination as one of those who “are led by the Spirit to this One [Jesus Christ], and are kept there, and go forward with Him.”<sup>80</sup> Barth therefore cautions that “[T]he Christian himself can never simply presuppose that he has the light and the power for genuine obedience.”<sup>81</sup> Rather, for Barth, precisely as obedience is genuine human action, so too it is also the divine action of grace, which liberates the ethical agent for free, spontaneous, and responsible co-operation in the history of the covenant.<sup>82</sup> And therefore for Barth, “[M]an is an active, not an inactive recipient, yet even in his activity he is still a recipient.”<sup>83</sup> This dynamic of grace and obedience reflects again the unity of Gospel and Law for Barth, in which connection Jüngel comments that

Barth’s construal of the relationship between Gospel and Law is ultimately interested in this correspondence, this analogy between God and humanity, which already permits the human person who exists in acts of self-determination to correspond ontologically to the God who exists as *actus purissimus*.<sup>84</sup>

Obedience as a human possibility is thus first and foremost a divine possibility.

At various points, Barth elucidates in greater detail the character of true obedience. Most fundamentally, he posits a strong connection between obedience and love, writing that “[A]s we come to faith we begin to love,”<sup>85</sup> and that “it is only in love that there can be real obedience.”<sup>86</sup> He argues that “[T]he fact that God is love means

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<sup>79</sup> IV/4, 35.

<sup>80</sup> IV/2, 375. Barth asserts that it is “only the Holy Spirit who can give him the light for right decisions and the power to make them,” III/3, 258. It seems misplaced, therefore, for Philip Rosato to complain that, for Barth, the Holy Spirit “is purposively conceptualised as possessing from eternity a purely noetic function,” *The Spirit as Lord - The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 161.

<sup>81</sup> III/3, 265.

<sup>82</sup> *TCL*, 102.

<sup>83</sup> *TCL*, 29.

<sup>84</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 206.

<sup>85</sup> I/2, 371.

<sup>86</sup> I/2, 385.

not only that we ought to love but can and must love,”<sup>87</sup> and hence that for the individual, “his freedom for love becomes and is his freedom for obedience.”<sup>88</sup> Barth thus asks whether the distinguishing feature of Christian ethics is not that

God’s requirements of man can be no other than the sharply contoured imperatives (*scharf als solche konturierten Imperative*) of the love that is freely addressed to him, that freely affirms him, and that freely wills and accomplishes his salvation?<sup>89</sup>

Jüngel thus writes that for Barth, the fundamental insight of Christian ethics is that “the human being is commanded *by* nothing other than the love of God and therefore *to* nothing other than love.”<sup>90</sup> The love commanded is not only a love for God, but also for “the fellow-man who stands in a definite historical relationship to the Christian who loves.”<sup>91</sup> Barth describes this horizontal dimension of the ethical imperative to love as “the circle of love directed to the neighbour as such.”<sup>92</sup>

However, Barth also elucidates the character of true obedience in greater specificity in view of the fact that the ethical agent is summoned to attest the grace of God not only in deed but also in attitude.<sup>93</sup> First, the obedience in question is for Barth can only be a free obedience,<sup>94</sup> for “[R]eluctant obedience to God’s command is not obedience.”<sup>95</sup> The free initiative of God in the covenant of grace instead “aims at a correspondingly free act, at genuine obedience as opposed to that of a puppet, on the part of the man with whom the covenant is made.”<sup>96</sup> Second, the obedience in

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<sup>87</sup> I/2, 374. Thus Barth notes that “love is nothing more and does not wish to be anything more than the obedient erecting of the sign of divine grace,” I/2, 400. There is a clear priority and directionality here: while the love of the ethical agent is a free human act that corresponds to the love of God, IV/2, 785, nevertheless its relationship to “the love with which God loves us is irreversible,” I/2, 400.

<sup>88</sup> IV/2, 799.

<sup>89</sup> *TCL*, 36. For this reason, Jüngel writes that “theological ethics, as an ethic of reconciliation, is already in its self-understanding as an intellectual discipline and the resultant self-limitation, an ethics of freedom,” *Barth-Studien*, 318.

<sup>90</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 318, emphasis added.

<sup>91</sup> IV/2, 802.

<sup>92</sup> III/4, 503. Barth writes that “God is rich in the sense that He gives away what belongs to Him without return, without making man subservient, but free. And it is in this that man may and should become His imitator in relation to his neighbour,” II/2, 620. Indeed, Barth observes of the individual that “if his action is service, it always includes the general fact that he looks and strives beyond himself, that he actualises his existence in his relationship to another,” III/4, 478.

<sup>93</sup> II/2, 579.

<sup>94</sup> IV/4, 132.

<sup>95</sup> II/2, 588.

<sup>96</sup> IV/2, 800. Barth therefore writes that the decision for obedience cannot be “a mechanical consequence of his being beset by God. If there were any question of mechanical operation, it would not be God who besets him. It can only be his very own free decision for this way,” IV/4, 36.

question can only be a repentant obedience. Barth notes that good works “are always works of repentance, works in which our sin is recognised, works in which we pray for the divine mercy.”<sup>97</sup> Repentance is particularly relevant in light of the fact that obedience to the command of God “begins always with the fact that we look towards it as those who know that it is our own free decision which will there be judged.”<sup>98</sup> Third, the obedience in question can only be a thankful obedience, for Barth comments that among all that the individual can do, only gratitude “is the essential and characteristic action which constitutes his true being.”<sup>99</sup> Indeed, Barth writes of the election of the individual that “God chooses him in order that his existence may become simply gratitude.”<sup>100</sup> And finally, the obedience in question can only be a joyful obedience, for at heart, “the decision commanded by God’s command cannot be other than a joyous one.”<sup>101</sup> Barth contends that “[I]f we do not will, freely and joyfully, what we are to do in virtue of the claim of the divine command, we shall always be disobedient to it.”<sup>102</sup> In summing up all these characteristics, Barth writes that “man can be honourable and have his glory only in pure thankfulness, in the deepest humility, and ... in free humour.”<sup>103</sup>

These characteristics of true obedience, as obedience itself, are actualised in the event of the encounter between the ethical agent and the divine command, and are therefore not fixed states or attitudes or possessions of the ethical agent. Biggar refers in this connection to Barth’s “reluctance to dwell on moral disposition, virtues, and character as such.”<sup>104</sup> However, it is perhaps fairer to say that Barth’s only reluctance is to conceive of these faculties as fixed predicates of the ethical agent. Rather Barth insists that obedience to God “can consist only in a continual readiness

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<sup>97</sup> II/2, 770.

<sup>98</sup> II/2, 634. Repentance itself remains a divinely-enabled possibility, for Barth writes with Luther that “[I]t is the work of God and not of man if we are led to Christian repentance and humility,” I/2, 262.

<sup>99</sup> III/2, 171.

<sup>100</sup> II/2, 413. Barth notes further that “the point of the obedience that man owes him [God] can be only the demonstration of his free gratitude,” *TCL*, 30. Mangina posits that “[G]ratitude is thus the form of historical activity by which the agent corresponds to the activity of God. Indeed, gratitude can be used as a comprehensive description of the Christian life itself,” *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 137.

<sup>101</sup> II/2, 611.

<sup>102</sup> II/2, 649. Hence Barth asserts that “the only positive option is joy, not as an empty and abstract cheerfulness, but as thanksgiving and obedience, and therefore as thinking, speech and action, as faith, love and hope, as responsibility and service,” IV/3, 248.

<sup>103</sup> III/4, 664.

<sup>104</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 131.



and willingness to follow His action, to do justice in a continual subjection to His electing and willing and producing.”<sup>105</sup> Therefore Barth contests that “as the service of God, it is to be noted that it can be discharged as such (in the service of man) only as it continually becomes this.”<sup>106</sup> Obedience and service and the attendant required dispositions can only become reality in action, in “following Jesus.”<sup>107</sup> And this happens only as the Holy Spirit truly commands the ethical agent, giving the orders and prohibitions which she must and can obey.<sup>108</sup>

### *iii) prayer*

Barth writes that “the required life in repentance, and therefore in conversion, consists in prayer.”<sup>109</sup> In this act, the ethical agent exists in freedom before God,<sup>110</sup> and in this way, prayer is for Barth “the normal action corresponding to the fulfilment of the covenant.”<sup>111</sup> Barth declares that

[T]he Christian is able to ask. The mystery that God is the Father of man and man the child of God has been revealed to him. And so he does ask. He says that which corresponds on his side to this happening and this revelation.<sup>112</sup>

Thus prayer is something which for Barth “must be continually repeated in all other acts of freedom.”<sup>113</sup> Jüngel notes that for Barth, the fundamental ethical analogy lies precisely here, in the fact that “in the invocation of God, which is commanded by the God whose being is a ‘being in act’, the individual is raised to a life in act which corresponds to God.”<sup>114</sup> Barth explains that

... prayer is the most intimate and effective form of Christian action. All other work

<sup>105</sup> IV/2, 802. Webster therefore comments that “the ethical life corresponding to that [Christian] vision of reality is not passive acquiescence ... but resolute, visible testimony to the new order of reality which underlies all contingent occurrence,” *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 120.

<sup>106</sup> IV/3, 832.

<sup>107</sup> III/3, 256.

<sup>108</sup> III/3, 258.

<sup>109</sup> II/2, 780.

<sup>110</sup> II/2, 180.

<sup>111</sup> *TCL*, 43. Barth writes that it is in prayer that Jesus Christ “fulfils His creaturely office in the history of creation as it was determined and prepared by God,” II/2, 126. Correspondingly, prayer is, for Barth “Christian obedience *in nuce*,” III/3, 265.

<sup>112</sup> III/3, 269. Barth thus writes that it is required of the individual “that he shall speak as he is able, that within these limits he shall do not only sincerely but in correspondence and response to what God has spoken to Him, and supremely that in this respect, in the turning to God where God alone hears him, he shall speak and not be silent,” III/4, 90.

<sup>113</sup> I/2, 698.

<sup>114</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 321.



comes far behind, and it is Christian work ... only to the extent that it derives from prayer, and that it has in prayer its true and original form. When the Christian wishes to act obediently, what else can he do but that which he does in prayer.<sup>115</sup>

In prayer, then, Barth writes, "there takes place the one thing necessary, the one thing that is demanded of the Christian, the one service that is required of him."<sup>116</sup>

As the being of the ethical agent is one of active responsibility before God in seeking and praying, it has for Barth the character of an invocation of God.<sup>117</sup> This prayer involves thanksgiving, repentance, and worship; but it is above all petition.<sup>118</sup> Barth writes of prayer that

[I]n the first instance, it is an asking, a seeking and a knocking directed towards God; a wishing, a desiring and a requesting presented to God. ... He cannot come before God with his petition without also worshipping God, without giving Him praise and thanksgiving, and without spreading out before Him his own wretchedness. But it is the fact that he comes before God with his petition which makes him a praying man.<sup>119</sup>

And therefore the act of petitionary prayer before God is, for Barth, "man's modest participation in the work of Jesus Christ, in which it has indeed come to pass that this man has made God's cause utterly His own."<sup>120</sup> Barth writes that the active invocation of God "aims at the renewal, or rather, the dynamic actualization, of what has become a static, stagnant, and frozen relationship with him."<sup>121</sup> This makes clear the sense in which invocation is a real event of encounter for the ethical agent.

In common with faith and obedience, prayer is not a possibility which the ethical agent possesses of herself. Barth argues in respect of the individual that "[T]o be able

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<sup>115</sup> III/3, 264.

<sup>116</sup> III/3, 265. For Barth, therefore, invocation is "the basic meaning of all human obedience," *TCL*, 44. This is equally true of the Christian community, which is obedient when its thought and speech and action finds itself in the movement of calling upon God, *TCL*, 108. Webster notes at this point that by making prayer rather than faith the organising motif of the Christian life, "the correspondence between divine and human agency is stated with greater force," *Barth's Moral Theology*, 173.

<sup>117</sup> III/2, 186.

<sup>118</sup> III/4, 100. Barth observes that "the invocation of God the Father which Jesus taught his disciples in the Lord's Prayer takes the form of pure petition," *TCL*, 89. And indeed Barth notes that "[T]he first and proper suppliant is none other than Jesus Christ Himself," III/3, 274. Barth consequently writes that prayer as petition "does not detract from the thanks and praise that are due and must be offered to God, but gives definite honor to their character as thanks and praise," *TCL*, 89. Indeed, Barth argues that "perhaps the very highest honour that God claims from man and man can pay Him is that man should seek and ask and accept at His hands, not just something, but everything he needs," III/4, 87.

<sup>119</sup> III/3, 268.

<sup>120</sup> III/4, 104.

<sup>121</sup> *TCL*, 85. From the divine side, of course, the relationship is never less than actualised, *TCL*, 85.

to pray, he must be awakened and called to prayer by God."<sup>122</sup> The ethical agent is only empowered and obligated to invocation by the grace of God,<sup>123</sup> in virtue of the movement and act of God.<sup>124</sup> As she prays, the ethical agent is never alone, for Barth considers that even individual prayer belongs to the Christian community,<sup>125</sup> but the community itself knows that it cannot do anything without Jesus Christ, and thus "cannot pray unless He prays with it."<sup>126</sup> Barth posits that it is

[N]ot out of the depths of some capability of our nature, not in the exercise of such a capability, but in the power of the grace displayed and effective in Jesus Christ ... that imperative [to pray] rings out, and the vocative 'Father' becomes possible, necessary, and actual in human thought and speech.<sup>127</sup>

As a result, the ethical agent and the community "will never regard its asking except as the gift and work of His Holy Spirit."<sup>128</sup>

At the same time, however, prayer is a truly human work, indeed it is "the true and proper work of the Christian,"<sup>129</sup> and "clearly a free act of man."<sup>130</sup> In prayer, the individual "makes the first available use of the freedom which is given to him by the amazing fact created in Jesus Christ."<sup>131</sup> The freedom to call upon God is "the freedom of the children of God,"<sup>132</sup> and is an "authentic freedom, not one of the inauthentic freedoms that man usually arrogates to himself and grasps and steals in his rebellion against God."<sup>133</sup> In this invocation, states Barth, the individual does

... that which corresponds and answers to the situation in which he finds himself placed by the Word of God. He does that which he is not merely permitted but commanded to do in this situation, seeing that he is obviously placed in this situation in order to do it. ... By coming before God as one who asks he magnifies God and abases himself.<sup>134</sup>

Invocation, according to Barth, must therefore "become an event in the lives of

<sup>122</sup> III/3, 283.

<sup>123</sup> *TCL*, 43.

<sup>124</sup> *TCL*, 90.

<sup>125</sup> III/4, 102.

<sup>126</sup> III/3, 277. Barth explains that "He, Jesus Christ, is properly and really the One who prays. But we belong to Him, and are therefore empowered, invited and summoned to pray to Him after and with Him," III/4, 94. Barth thus posits that "prayer derives from what the Christian receives," III/3, 270.

<sup>127</sup> *TCL*, 65-66.

<sup>128</sup> III/3, 277.

<sup>129</sup> III/3, 265.

<sup>130</sup> I/2, 698.

<sup>131</sup> III/3, 269.

<sup>132</sup> *TCL*, 72.

<sup>133</sup> *TCL*, 234.

<sup>134</sup> III/3, 270. Here, too, Gospel and Law are united and ordered in the Word of God: Barth writes that "[W]hat we can and should pray is indissolubly united in the work of Jesus Christ," III/4, 106.

Christians ... as the primal and basic form of the whole Christian ethos."<sup>135</sup> Barth thus concludes that, on the one hand, the invocation of God is empowered by the free grace of God, yet, on the other hand, it remains an authentic human action.<sup>136</sup>

Barth posits a strong connection between the event of prayer and its basis in the act of Christian hope. The saving deed of hope in Jesus Christ, he writes, consists in the fact that the members of the community "pray together that He will answer and be responsible for them."<sup>137</sup> Barth posits that hope in Jesus Christ,

... in the blessing of His vouching and answering for man's weakness and corruption, is not an inactive hope. It is a hope which is active in prayer to Him for this blessing. The true and living Jesus Christ ... is the One towards whom His people, the community and the world move only in their specific act of prayer.<sup>138</sup>

This hope never becomes a static possession of the ethical agent.<sup>139</sup> It is rather an action empowered by Jesus Christ, who "causes the Christian to become a man who may stride towards his future in hope in Him,"<sup>140</sup> and originating in the Holy Spirit, who "awakens a man to be a Christian, to be the kind of Christian who may hope in God."<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, hope remains a free act of the ethical agent,<sup>142</sup> an action for which she is permitted and commanded and liberated.<sup>143</sup> Barth therefore writes that her future "can consist only in a living hope which is continually confirmed and exercised."<sup>144</sup> In this hope, the ethical agent grasps hold of the promise of God,<sup>145</sup> just

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<sup>135</sup> *TCL*, 89. Barth adds importantly that if the ethical agent prays for the name of God to be hallowed, "it does, of course, entail necessarily that there should be the corresponding willing, acting, and doing on man's part," *TCL*, 156. Similarly, Barth asserts that if the prayer of the ethical agent is for the coming of the kingdom of God, "Christians are claimed for action in the effort and struggle for human righteousness," *TCL*, 264. He thus states with the tradition that "[T]he law of prayer is the law of action," *TCL*, 168. Jüngel therefore notes that as grounded in invocation, human action is "altogether worldly," *Barth-Studien*, 322.

<sup>136</sup> *TCL*, 42.

<sup>137</sup> IV/4, 208.

<sup>138</sup> IV/4, 209.

<sup>139</sup> IV/4, 199.

<sup>140</sup> IV/3, 902. Thus the ethical agent hopes "on the basis and in the power and righteousness and holiness of the One [Jesus Christ] in whom he may believe and whom he may love," IV/3, 915.

<sup>141</sup> IV/3, 941.

<sup>142</sup> IV/3, 913.

<sup>143</sup> IV/3, 918.

<sup>144</sup> IV/4, 197. Hence Barth writes that progress after baptism "can consist only in further responses to the Word of God which they accepted here, and hence in mere repetitions and variations of the grasping and exercising of this hope," IV/4, 198. Hope is therefore a work required of the individual, such that "he is responsible for its proper fulfilment," IV/3, 940. As Webster notes, then, hope is no static attitude, but has "imperative dimensions," *Barth's Moral Theology*, 81.

<sup>145</sup> IV/4, 134.

as in prayer, “[T]he promise given to the Church has still to be received again and again by each of its members.”<sup>146</sup> Because of their hope, Christians must offer prayers “with the unconditional expectation that their calling ... is not just heard but is also answered,”<sup>147</sup> for Barth warns that “[I]nvocation apart from the unconditional expectation of God’s answer would be blasphemy.”<sup>148</sup>

If prayer is to be genuine, then not only must it be offered in confident hope and expectation, but a number of further conditions must also be satisfied. First, the prayers must be offered in joy, for Barth declares that “they can have no other character than that of a free and supremely cheerful and peaceful action, because he [God] himself evokes and awakens this character in them.”<sup>149</sup> Second, the prayers must be offered in humility, for Barth demands that the ethical agent be ready both to be taught in prayer and also to realise how impure even her purest prayers remain.<sup>150</sup> And finally, the prayers must be offered in the knowledge that they are not an individualistic enterprise, for “invocation of God is as such a supremely social matter, publicly social, not to say political and even cosmic.”<sup>151</sup>

## **B - the aspects of conformity**

Having sketched out the content of conformity in the *Church Dogmatics* in the previous section, this section considers three particular aspects of this human conformity: first, the limitations of conformity are elucidated; second, the reality of conformity is affirmed; and third, the ecclesial context of conformity is explored.

### *i) the limitations of conformity*

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<sup>146</sup> I/2, 453-454.

<sup>147</sup> *TCL*, 104-105.

<sup>148</sup> *TCL*, 105. This is true despite the fact that prayer “is made with all the imperfection and perversion and impotence of all things human,” III/3, 277, for Barth asserts that what the ethical agent does badly in prayer is made good by divine grace, III/4, 101.

<sup>149</sup> *TCL*, 59.

<sup>150</sup> III/4, 102. Barth observes that the recognition of sin and guilt “is an inalienable constituent of the recognition of the grace of God. In actual fact, it can be achieved only in prayer,” II/2, 752.

<sup>151</sup> *TCL*, 95. Barth comments that “one cannot plead one’s own cause before God without first and foremost pleading His, which is also the cause of the whole community, of the ecumenical Church and indeed of all creation,” III/4, 110. Therefore, although the individual prays for himself as an individual, he does not pray private prayers, III/3, 283; rather he “can call only upon *our* Father as God even when he finds himself in greatest solitude,” *TCL*, 82.

For Barth, the way in which and the extent to which the ethical agent corresponds to the divine command are carefully circumscribed. The required conformity is possible only by an act of grace, only as an act of distinction, and only as an act in concealment. Each of these features is considered briefly in turn below.

a) conformity as an act of grace

As has emerged clearly, the power to achieve correspondence does not lie within the capabilities of the ethical agent, but only in the event of an act of grace of Jesus Christ. Barth writes that

[C]reation in itself and as such never has the power, capacity or competence on the basis of the election of grace to be the servant and instrument of the God who acts in the covenant of grace and kingdom of Jesus Christ ... . We cannot say, therefore, that in itself and as such it possesses and has these qualities and determinations.<sup>152</sup>

Moreover, this situation is exacerbated by the sinfulness of the creature. Barth writes that “every expression of our love to God, however well intended, is inexorably exposed to the law of the corruption and transitoriness of this world and of our old nature,”<sup>153</sup> and therefore that “our actions are valueless in the sight of God, and our life forfeit.”<sup>154</sup> Consequently, Barth states that

... if there is to be a real praise of God and love of our neighbour in our activity, there has to take place an activity of God which we with our activity can only serve, and which from the standpoint of our activity can only have the character of a miracle.<sup>155</sup>

Thus the fulfilment of the Law never occurs in separation from the power of the Gospel: it is the grace of God which moves and directs the ethical agent in accordance with her determination,<sup>156</sup> and thus moves her action to correspondence,

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<sup>152</sup> III/3, 52.

<sup>153</sup> I/2, 414.

<sup>154</sup> II/2, 752. For Barth, there is no action here below that “does not have the marks of sloth or can be anything but displeasing to God,” IV/2, 528.

<sup>155</sup> I/2, 450. It is for Barth “a miracle of the divine mercy that within the limits of his creaturely world there should be an activity which stands in relation to the action of the Creator and which therefore points beyond those limits - a creaturely freedom which as such can attest and reflect God’s own freedom, indicate God’s kingdom and fatherly providence and therefore serve God,” III/4, 483. Again, Barth notes that the One “who gives man this commandment and imposes on him this obligation puts him also in the position to do what is demanded; indeed, that by His power He causes man to achieve what is demanded; indeed, that by His power He causes man to achieve what is demanded. ... This is the imperative of divine grace in this matter,” III/4, 76.

<sup>156</sup> II/2, 567.



conformity, and uniformity with the divine action and her being to become the image of God.<sup>157</sup> In this divine action, it is the objective reality of Jesus Christ which presses upon the ethical agent, in order that there should be in her a subjective correspondence.<sup>158</sup> And this subjective correspondence which distinguishes the action of the Christian is enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>159</sup> Hence when Jüngel asserts that “God speaks (*spricht*), the person corresponds (*entspricht*),”<sup>160</sup> the speaking of God in this sense is not only noetically but also ontically effective.

The goodness of human ethical action, therefore, does not lie in any goodness of its own,<sup>161</sup> but is rather something that it can only become in virtue of the calling of Jesus Christ.<sup>162</sup> Barth writes that as

... the Christian believes and obeys and prays there does not merely take place a creaturely movement. But concealed within the creaturely movement, yet none the less really, there moves the finger and hand and sceptre of the God who rules the world.<sup>163</sup>

And therefore the freedom for doing good works has, for Barth, to be “continually given even in detail.”<sup>164</sup> As Hunsinger suggests, then, “[W]hat is decisive for the

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<sup>157</sup> II/2, 575.

<sup>158</sup> IV/2, 303. It is for Barth Jesus Christ alone who “does actually create this correspondence to His life in the existence of other men,” IV/2, 325. And therefore the holiness of human actions “is always dependent upon the answering witness of the One whom they aim and profess to attest,” IV/1, 693-694. Krötke writes that Barth “understands the correspondence between the existence of God and the existence of the human person as something that only discloses itself in faith in the God who affirms all human beings in the man Jesus,” in “Karl Barth’s anthropology,” 167. While this is true, it does not yet make sufficiently clear that for Barth, the analogy in question is not only disclosed in faith in the man Jesus, but is also ontically grounded in His existence and in the divine ‘Yes’ to humanity which that existence incarnates and actualises.

<sup>159</sup> II/2, 348. Barth writes that “[I]f God is glorified through the creature, this is only because by the Holy Spirit the creature is baptised, and born again and called and gathered and enlightened and sanctified and kept close to Jesus Christ in true and genuine faith,” II/1, 670. As Webster notes, then, the “bond between the moral self and God, brought to dogmatic expression by language about the Holy Spirit, constitutes the only context in which it is proper to attribute goodness to human action,” *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 225-226.

<sup>160</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 226.

<sup>161</sup> II/2, 578.

<sup>162</sup> IV/2, 593. The fulfilment of all the conditions Barth lists for a good human work - that the ethical agent is sanctified in and by Jesus Christ, called to His discipleship, awakened to conversion by His Holy Spirit, and engaged in conversion, IV/2, 593 - lie on the side of divine action. As Christopher Morse notes, then, “[T]he conversion of the creature into an analogue of God is a movement verifying not God, but the creature ... . None of this happens as an attribute, possession, or possibility of the creature,” in “Raising God’s Eyebrows: Some Further Thoughts on the Concept of the *Analogia Fidei*,” in *USQR* 37 (1981-1982), 42.

<sup>163</sup> III/3, 288.

<sup>164</sup> IV/2, 595. The ethical agent possesses and has the ability to be a servant and instrument of God only as she receives it, as she is given it by God, III/3, 52.



event of correspondence is the divine, not the human, activity.”<sup>165</sup> With these safeguards in place, however, Barth is able to write of human action as righteous or kingdom-like,<sup>166</sup> of a human co-operation in the performance of the will of God,<sup>167</sup> of active human participation in the grace of God,<sup>168</sup> and of good and saving human action.<sup>169</sup> In view of this, the best that the ethical agent can do is to believe that one will “act rightly, and therefore with the promise that it will be a brotherly action, only when we count on the decisive miracle as a miracle of God.”<sup>170</sup> And as such, the action of the ethical agent “can only be a seeking, an asking after holiness, a prayer for it.”<sup>171</sup>

#### b) conformity as an act of distinction

Even as it conforms to the divine action, Barth firmly relativises human action, writing that it acquires importance, justification and worth only “as in some way it is done in relation to the work of God,”<sup>172</sup> and that there is “no good human work unless it has this divine work as its basis and source.”<sup>173</sup> Barth writes therefore that “the correspondence which alone can be considered in this connexion cannot and will not mean abolition of ‘the infinite qualitative difference’ between God and man.”<sup>174</sup> Even

<sup>165</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 172.

<sup>166</sup> *TCL*, 266.

<sup>167</sup> III/3, 286. Barth states that “[W]e do not rightly describe Christian faith and Christian obedience if we do not think of them as a human co-operation in the doing of the will of God,” III/3, 286. Jüngel posits that in Barth’s construal of this matter, the *co-operatio* between God and the ethical agent has found “its genuinely Protestant and evangelical formulation,” *Barth-Studien*, 321. Hartwell’s concern that any form of co-operation on the part of the ethical agent is contrary to Barth’s teaching is thus without foundation, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 186.

<sup>168</sup> IV/4, 6. Macken interprets this to mean that “Barth goes so far as to say that the human subject may himself put grace into effect,” *Autonomy*, 83, citing *KD* IV/4, 6. However, this is true for Barth only as it remains precisely here an explicitly divine possibility, IV/4, 6. Jüngel correspondingly states that “the individual in his human action shares actively in grace because he already shares passively in the same grace,” *Barth-Studien*, 269. Webster concurs, arguing that human agency is ‘internal’ rather than ‘external’ to the operation of grace for Barth, but only because “grace evokes correspondences,” *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 90.

<sup>169</sup> IV/4, 212. Barth is writing here in respect of water baptism, and stresses that it is saving work only as it is *epiclesis*, IV/4, 212. Jüngel observes that for Barth, baptism “is not salvific as it effects the forgiveness of sins, but as it recognises the already effected and being effected forgiveness of sins as already effected and being effected,” *Barth-Studien*, 269.

<sup>170</sup> I/2, 447.

<sup>171</sup> IV/1, 694. And hence Jüngel notes that the goodness of ethical activity only “finds its answer in an ethics of prayer,” *Barth-Studien*, 324.

<sup>172</sup> III/2, 409.

<sup>173</sup> IV/2, 590.

<sup>174</sup> II/2, 577. There can be no continuation of the acts of God, no development of an identity between

in correspondence, then, “God and man are in clear and inflexible antithesis.”<sup>175</sup>

For Barth, human action in correspondence with God “can be done only in our human place and our human manner, only within the limits of our human capabilities and possibilities.”<sup>176</sup> Consequently, ethical action “can only be a question of an accompanying or following, of a correspondence and not the repetition of an original.”<sup>177</sup> This means that human action “cannot be anything but play, i.e. a childlike imitation and reflection of the fatherly action of God,”<sup>178</sup> in which the ethical agent ventures to fulfil the command of God with “purely provisional and relative, yet still with definite, steps.”<sup>179</sup> With a profound understanding of the Christian life, Barth writes correspondingly that Christians are “wanderers who pass from one small and provisional response, from one small and provisional perception and love, to another.”<sup>180</sup> Human righteousness will therefore “always be, even at best, an imperfect, fragile, and highly problematical righteousness.”<sup>181</sup> Thus ethical action represents “an infrequent, weak, uncertain and flickering glow which stands in a sorry relationship to the perfection of even the smallest beam of light.”<sup>182</sup>

However, Barth is clear that this action is truly required, arguing that Christians “must press and involve themselves too in their own place and manner as people and within the limits of their own human capabilities and possibilities.”<sup>183</sup> Barth cautions that “we can as little withhold our humanity from the service of grace because of its unfitness, as we can flaunt it before God to our own self-glorification,”<sup>184</sup> and

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God and the human, and no supersession of Jesus Christ or the Church, II/2, 577-578. Barth posits therefore that the ethical agent “cannot repeat nor anticipate God’s victory,” *TCL*, 181.

<sup>175</sup> II/2, 577.

<sup>176</sup> *TCL*, 170.

<sup>177</sup> IV/2, 303.

<sup>178</sup> III/4, 553.

<sup>179</sup> *TCL*, 187. Barth writes that these steps of the ethical agent are to be “totally resolute yet totally modest, totally fearless yet totally without illusions, totally courageous yet totally humble,” *TCL*, 185.

<sup>180</sup> IV/2, 286.

<sup>181</sup> *TCL*, 265.

<sup>182</sup> IV/2, 286. Barth writes that the actions of Christians can only be “provisional, little fulfilments, anticipatory and indicatory of the great, comprehensive and definitive fulfilment to be expected in that future revelation,” IV/3, 644. Consequently, Barth notes that “in all these reflections and impressions there can never be more than a very fragmentary and indeed distorted and confused reproduction of what is really to be expressed,” IV/3, 656.

<sup>183</sup> *TCL*, 169.

<sup>184</sup> I/2, 702.

observes that “[T]he limitation of the action required of us does not alter in the slightest the urgency with which it is required.”<sup>185</sup> Alluding again to the unity of Gospel and Law, Barth concludes that Christians

... are with great strictness required and with great kindness freed and empowered to do what they can do in the sphere of the relative possibilities assigned to them, to do it very imperfectly yet heartily, quietly, and cheerfully.<sup>186</sup>

Barth asserts that the reason for this is that “it is ... not the case that God wills to tread without us.”<sup>187</sup> Instead, where the Christian serves God, there is a “fellowship of action (*Tatgemeinschaft*) between Christ and Christians.”<sup>188</sup> Therefore he notes that as ethical action is “undertaken in obedience and ventured with humility and resoluteness, it will not just be unlike God’s act but also like it, running parallel to it on our level, a modest but clear analogue.”<sup>189</sup> And as such, “it cannot be denied that in all its imperfection this action stands related to the kingdom of God, and therefore to the perfect righteousness of God.”<sup>190</sup> Hence in the little movements in the life of the ethical agent “the great critical and positive movement which He has made for us and with us must and will be reflected.”<sup>191</sup>

### c) conformity as an act in concealment

A true act of conformity, which derives from the divine grace yet which is distinguished from the divine action, remains one which lies beyond the direct perception of the ethical agent or the people around her. Barth contends that the

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<sup>185</sup> *TCL*, 172.

<sup>186</sup> *TCL*, 265. Barth observes accordingly that “the worthiness of human action can never be claimed as a right, nor can the unworthiness of human action ever be regarded as an obstacle ... to discharging at once and in all circumstances the obedience which is enjoined,” I/2, 850.

<sup>187</sup> IV/3, 656.

<sup>188</sup> IV/3, 601, *KD* IV/3, 689. This *Tatgemeinschaft* is clearly marked by an inner distinctiveness, for in it, “two very different active subjects are obviously at work together in different ways, but with a clear differentiation of function. The One is the Lord ... . The other is the servant ... ,” IV/3, 601. Barth comments that “the term service is particularly well adapted to denote the fellowship of action between Christ and Christians in view of its inner distinctiveness,” IV/3, 601.

<sup>189</sup> *TCL*, 175. In the light of this, it is somewhat perplexing to find Richardson argue that “although Barth’s understanding comes to full expression only in *CD* II/2 and the later parts of the *CD*, Barth no longer regards any human action as anything closely analogous to divine action,” *Reading Karl Barth*, 193. Closer to the mark here is Mangina, when he writes that “within the limits imposed by its finitude and, more drastically, by its sin, the creature enters into an analogy with its Creator,” *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 136.

<sup>190</sup> *TCL*, 265-266.

<sup>191</sup> IV/2, 584.

success of the ethical agent in corresponding to the divine action lies neither in the sphere of her power, nor in the sphere of her knowledge.<sup>192</sup> Barth writes that

[I]n all the heights and depths of our life, even our Christian life, we look in vain for our true sanctification for God as it is already impregnably and irrevocably accomplished. ... When and where are we such believers of ourselves that we can believe on the basis of our own witness, the witness of our own inner or outer works?<sup>193</sup>

Correspondence to the divine command can only be a matter of sanctification by the divine command, and this fact lies beyond any discovery that the ethical agent is able to make on her own account.<sup>194</sup> Rather, Barth writes, true knowledge of sanctification can only be had in Jesus Christ, for it is only in knowledge of Him that her being in correspondence is revealed.<sup>195</sup> Barth notes of the newness of the Christian life that

[I]t is not a newness of which he [the individual] can be conscious and boast, except in Jesus, except in the approach of this kingdom. According to the description of the true saint ... it is a newness that is concealed from all men and even from himself.<sup>196</sup>

It is therefore an error to believe that "the goodness, that is, the holiness of the Christian character ... can be directly perceived and therefore demonstrated, described and set up as a norm."<sup>197</sup> Barth writes that "[A]ccording to the description of the true saint [in the Sermon on the Mount] it is a newness that is concealed from all men and even from himself, and yet a real newness of life."<sup>198</sup> Lovin remarks that "[T]he child of God knows in action what God's will requires, but this certainty is neither visible to his neighbor nor available for his own reflection."<sup>199</sup> Consequently, when correspondence occurs in the action of an ethical agent, Barth writes that "this is concealed from their own eyes, and true in the righteous and merciful judgment of

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<sup>192</sup> I/2, 446. Barth notes of the individual that "[I]t does not lie in his power, or in the competence of his judgment, to say whether what he does, as gratitude or responsibility, as knowledge and obedience, shall be accepted as righteous and well-pleasing to God," III/2, 190. Barth also dismisses the possibility that this ability might lie within the knowledge or power of the Church, IV/1, 693.

<sup>193</sup> II/2, 775.

<sup>194</sup> II/2, 776.

<sup>195</sup> IV/2, 271.

<sup>196</sup> II/2, 691.

<sup>197</sup> I/2, 782. By contrast, Barth throughout takes seriously the biblical testimony that the life of the Christian is hidden with Christ in God, I/2, 782. It is in this alone that the Christian can be secure, absolutely and essentially secure, IV/3, 645, for, as Jüngel notes, the only unqualified good is "the human action which corresponds to the gracious will of God, which as such is only revealed in Jesus Christ," *Barth-Studien*, 329. Caution must therefore be exercised in interpreting Barth's call for the existence within the Church of "definite personal examples of Christian life and witness," IV/3, 887. Such examples are clearly said to be simply witnesses, IV/3, 888, and are something that can neither be postulated nor programmed, IV/3, 889.

<sup>198</sup> II/2, 693.

<sup>199</sup> Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 41.

God.”<sup>200</sup> True perception remains a matter for faith, and true faith looks neither to the ethical agent nor to her ethical action for the good, but only to the person and work of Jesus Christ, in whom and in which she is included.<sup>201</sup>

d) a positive limitation

The limitations outlined above might lead to the conclusion that the construal of human conformity which Barth propounds involves an inherent diminution and devaluing of ethical action. However, as seen in the previous chapter, when limitation is something that comes from God, it is “not a negation but the most positive affirmation.”<sup>202</sup> Precisely in this limitation, the ethical agent finds her true humanity, for “[I]t is genuinely human in the deepest sense to live by the electing grace of God addressed to man.”<sup>203</sup> As she does this, she offers to her fellow humans “the image of a strangely human person.”<sup>204</sup> Moreover, Barth is clear that from a human perspective, “the little steps may very well be great ones too, i.e., extremely notable acts, attitudes and accomplishments, yet still done in modesty, and therefore honourable and obedient.”<sup>205</sup>

ii) the reality of conformity

Given the apparently severe limitations which Barth places on human conformity, it may be doubted whether or not Barth actually leaves any room at all for conformity in his construal of ethical action. Robert Willis correctly argues that “[I]f obedience remains always an *unactualized* potential (except in Christ), then *this* would seem to spell disaster for the possibility of significant human action.”<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> III/4, 208.

<sup>201</sup> II/2, 547.

<sup>202</sup> III/4, 567. Barth notes that under the divine limitation, “there can be no talk of a curtailment or impoverishment or deprivation of the one thus limited. His very limiting is His special, exalted, rich and glorious giving. His limiting is His definite, concrete and specific affirmation,” III/4, 568.

<sup>203</sup> IV/2, 89.

<sup>204</sup> *TCL*, 204.

<sup>205</sup> III/4, 666.

<sup>206</sup> Willis, *Ethics*, 193 n.1. The real problem Willis has is the prospect that, in light of the concealment of human correspondence discussed above, “[W]e neither know of, nor can we find at any point in our lives, the conformity with the unity of the divine command which is demanded of us,” *Ethics*, 190.



Throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, however, Barth steadfastly declares the reality of human correspondence. Barth asks rhetorically:

[I]f there are no human works which are praised by God, and praise Him in return, and are thus good, in what sense can we speak of a real alteration of the human situation effected in the death of Jesus Christ and revealed in the power of His resurrection in the Holy Spirit?<sup>207</sup>

The objective reality of what has happened to the ethical agent in Jesus Christ is not therefore without its effects in her life. As Christians know Jesus, so too they know “themselves as men reconciled, justified and sanctified in Him, and may thus make use of the freedom indicated to them in Him.”<sup>208</sup> Barth thus insists that “the love of the children of God does become an event in the act or acts of human self-determination: it is a creaturely reality.”<sup>209</sup> In Jesus Christ, Barth asserts, there is “a participation of the Christian not merely in His prophetic and high-priestly but also in His kingly office.”<sup>210</sup> Karin Bornkamm thus suggests that for Barth, the Christian

... is essentially an agent, empowered by Christ irrespective of her creatureliness to a being ‘in a partnership with God which is actively undertaken and maintained,’ a being ‘in man’s own free responsibility with God for the cause of God.’<sup>211</sup>

And Barth himself posits that obedient ethical action will thus always “set forth the kingdom of God drawn near.”<sup>212</sup>

The reality (and thus also the possibility) of this correspondence is founded on the eternal election of humanity in Jesus Christ. Barth states that

[T]he elect man in his place and fashion is, in his being, a copy of the divine being. The life which corresponds to his election, and the manifestation and consummation of the distinction which from the outset is peculiar to him, do indeed develop within very

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<sup>207</sup> IV/2, 585.

<sup>208</sup> IV/3, 352. Hence Barth notes that “[I]t is not now merely human sloth which rules here below. ... [T]here is obedience as well as disobedience. It is highly unsatisfactory obedience. It stands in constant need of forgiveness. But it is obedience,” IV/2, 529-530.

<sup>209</sup> I/2, 373.

<sup>210</sup> III/3, 287. Barth explains that in Jesus Christ, and in only in Jesus Christ, “we are set at God’s side and lifted up to Him and therefore to the place where decisions are made in the affairs of His government. And this is what takes place in Christian faith and Christian obedience and Christian prayer,” III/3, 287. While Hunsinger is right to distinguish between Christian witness and eternal life as different experiential aspects of salvation, he is therefore wrong to attribute participation in the kingly aspect of the work of Jesus Christ exclusively to the latter, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 181.

<sup>211</sup> Karin Bornkamm, “Die reformatorische Lehre vom Amt Christi,” in *ZThK*, Beiheft 6 (1986), 30, quoting IV/1, 113.

<sup>212</sup> IV/2, 543.



It is not of herself but as one elect in Jesus Christ that this correspondence of the ethical agent occurs. Barth notes that “[H]is election as such is equipment for this end because it is the conformity which he has been given with God Himself, the reflection of the divine countenance.”<sup>214</sup> Despite the sinfulness of the ethical agent, then, Barth observes that the grace of God means that “God is really known and worshipped, there is a genuine activity of man as reconciled to God.”<sup>215</sup> It is therefore clear that for Barth, the most real thing about the ethical agent is her determination in the election of Jesus Christ, and not her own self-determination in sinfulness. Barth writes that

[I]f only in analogy to the existence of Jesus Christ, yet really in this analogy they, too, as the children of God exist in repetition, confirmation and revelation not only of the manner but also of the will and act of God as the One from whom they derive.<sup>216</sup>

In practical terms, this means that nothing is more real in her life than those events in which she corresponds to her original determination and fulfils in that way the covenant of grace from below. Therefore Mangina is right to note that for Barth

... even the most subtle anthropology will fail to be ‘concrete’ if it fails to make reference to what is most real - the new man enacted by God in Jesus. Theological accounts of personhood can at best only try to catch up with this genuinely concrete reality.<sup>217</sup>

Therefore Barth writes of the new life of the ethical agent with Jesus Christ that “even here and now, ... this life does not lack anything of reality, and therefore of significance and power, of truth and force.”<sup>218</sup> He thus posits that to the small extent that the individual is obedient, “at specific points and in specific ways he is posited and used in the service of the divine lordship, in the fulfilment of the positive divine

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<sup>213</sup> II/2, 343-344.

<sup>214</sup> II/2, 345.

<sup>215</sup> I/2, 344. Barth posits that “even a sinful man in his sinful work - and we are all sinners and therefore all our works are sinful - may declare the good work of God, and therefore, even as a sinner and in the course of sinning, do a good work,” IV/2, 589.

<sup>216</sup> IV/3, 533.

<sup>217</sup> Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 190. On the one hand, in respect of the sinner in herself, Barth cautions that “[W]e are neither those who fulfil and satisfy the *claim* of the divine command, nor those that we ought to be on the basis of the *decision* made concerning us in the divine command,” II/2, 742. On the other hand, in respect of the elect in Christ, Barth affirms that “as those whom Jesus Christ has called and calls to Himself in the work of His Spirit, they exist in particular proximity to Him and therefore in analogy to what He is,” IV/3, 532.

<sup>218</sup> II/2, 608.

will.”<sup>219</sup> Consequently, Barth asserts, “little renovations and provisional sanctifications and reassurances and elucidations will necessarily penetrate the whole man, who ... has undoubtedly become a new subject.”<sup>220</sup>

*iii) the ecclesial context of conformity*

In exploring the way of conformity in the *Church Dogmatics* thus far, the focus in this chapter has been on the ethical agent as an individual. However, Barth explicitly registers that in Scripture, the Church is portrayed as the spatio-temporal locus of the divine claim,<sup>221</sup> and therefore that “Christian ethics is never concerned only with the requirement of an abstract private morality but always with instructions for the edifying of the community.”<sup>222</sup> For Barth, the election of the ethical agent is by and for Jesus Christ, but this election is also “through and for His community,”<sup>223</sup> thus he writes that “the obedient action of man consists basically in joining the community.”<sup>224</sup> For Barth then, the ethical agent as a Christian stands or falls with the cause of the Church.<sup>225</sup> And what must occur in the existence of the Church is that the particular history of Jesus Christ, “both as history and in its particularity, should be actively and recognisably reflected and represented in its life.”<sup>226</sup>

Barth writes that the existence of the community “finds not merely its meaning but its very basis and possibility only in its mission, its ministry, its witness, its task and

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<sup>219</sup> III/3, 259.

<sup>220</sup> IV/1, 775. The final note is one of caution, however, for Barth warns that as Christians still move in the sphere of human sin and the fight against it, “they are well advised not to make extravagant gestures nor to make too big a song about what they do,” *TCL*, 267. Jesse Couenhoven thus rightly draws attention to the fact that Barth demonstrates in his writing on the Christian life the (eschatological) “tension between gospel and law and between the aspects of grace as pardon and power,” in “Grace as Pardon and Power,” in *JRE* 28.1 (2000), 82.

<sup>221</sup> II/2, 574.

<sup>222</sup> IV/2, 637. As Lovin notes, for Barth, “God addresses individual persons, to be sure, but *as part of a people*,” *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 102. Lovin continues, “[T]he story of faith is not a series of stories about isolated individuals. It is the account of a community whom God summons to a continuing covenant partnership. Only when we understand that about the hearers of God’s Word do we fully understand the Word itself,” *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 102-103.

<sup>223</sup> II/2, 411.

<sup>224</sup> III/4, 493. Human co-operation in the service of this community consists for Barth in attaching to the community, III/4, 490, in orienting the community to the Lord, III/4, 493, and in following the commission of the community to the world (in love, mission, preaching, and prophecy), III/4, 502.

<sup>225</sup> *TCL*, 190.

<sup>226</sup> IV/2, 696. Within this corporate perspective, it remains true that each individual “is called, with equal seriousness, to play his part, and to do so as if everything depended on him,” IV/2, 694.

therefore its positive relation to those who are without.”<sup>227</sup> That means for Barth that “since the community of Jesus Christ exists first and supremely for God, it has no option but in its own manner and place to exist for the world.”<sup>228</sup> The way in which the community obediently corresponds to the rule of Jesus Christ is consequently in unequivocal, total, and universal service: its freedom, and that of each individual within it is the freedom to serve.<sup>229</sup>

However, despite this calling to and empowerment for a series of different tasks of ministry and service,<sup>230</sup> the commission of the community (and thus of the individuals within) is discharged first and foremost in Christian worship.<sup>231</sup> Barth observes that “it is only as the community has its distinct centre in its worship that it can and will stand out clearly from the world.”<sup>232</sup> For Barth, the concrete form of this worship is in confession, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and prayer.<sup>233</sup> In confessing Jesus Christ, the community makes its response to the Word of God addressed to it, to “the One who has brought them together by awakening them all to know Him and believe in Him and love Him and hope in Him.”<sup>234</sup> In baptism, the baptisand seeks in a human action to correspond to “the cleansing and renewal which have come to them in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>235</sup> In the Lord’s Supper, instituted to represent the perfect fellowship between Jesus Christ and the community, the community celebrates, adores, and proclaims the Self-offering of Jesus Christ.<sup>236</sup> And in prayer, the trusting community encounters God and becomes “an active partner in

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<sup>227</sup> IV/3, 826.

<sup>228</sup> IV/3, 762. Barth observes that it is given to this people to know the world as it is, IV/3, 769, to practise solidarity with the world, IV/3, 773, and to be under obligation to the world, IV/3, 777.

<sup>229</sup> IV/2, 690.

<sup>230</sup> IV/3, 865-901.

<sup>231</sup> IV/1, 698.

<sup>232</sup> IV/1, 697.

<sup>233</sup> IV/2, 706.

<sup>234</sup> IV/2, 699. Barth writes that this will occur “as the Word of God is proclaimed and published and taught and preached and heard by the community according to the commission of its Lord,” IV/2, 700.

<sup>235</sup> IV/4, 132. Barth therefore writes that “Christian baptism is the first form of the human decision which in the foundation of the Christian life corresponds to the divine change,” IV/4, 44.

<sup>236</sup> IV/3, 542. Barth acknowledges only one sacrament, positing that “there is no sacramental union and unity at all as distinct from the unity of God and man in their unity as it is grounded and achieved in Jesus Christ,” IV/2, 55. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are thus “only a symbolical expression of the fact that in its worship the community is gathered directly around Jesus Himself, and lives by and with Him,” III/2, 468. Yet as such, they are for Barth “the simplest, and yet in their very simplicity the most eloquent, elements in the witness which the community owes to the world,” IV/3, 901.

the covenant which He has established.”<sup>237</sup> As the community fulfils its tasks in this way, writes Barth, there is achieved “the very thing for the sake of and in the context of which everything else must happen, which truly binds the world together and which is the ultimate goal of all else that is done.”<sup>238</sup>

This commission is not something which the community can fulfil of its own resources. Rather it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ empowers the community “to give a provisional representation of the sanctification of all humanity and human life as it has taken place in Him.”<sup>239</sup> Nevertheless, the community is called to active obedience, following within the limits of its own possibilities “not in one great absolute step, but in several small and relative steps.”<sup>240</sup> It is commanded by Jesus Christ “to follow and yet at the same time to precede His universal call.”<sup>241</sup> And as this occurs, so for Barth, “even in its weakness and corruption, in anticipation of the disclosure of the secret of all creation, it is already revealed to be service of God and man here and now in time and space.”<sup>242</sup>

### **C - the actualism of conformity**

Barth construes the limited but real conformity of ethical action in the *Church Dogmatics* firmly within his actualistic ontology. This means that conformity in faith, obedience, and prayer can never be substantialistically predicated of the ethical agent. In what follows, this actualistic construal of conformity will be considered first in terms of its Christological basis, and then in terms of its ramifications for justification, sanctification, and vocation.

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<sup>237</sup> IV/3, 883. Barth cautions that where the community does not pray, “it does not work, its whole action being hollow and futile,” IV/3, 884. Moreover, as it prays, the community takes responsibility for the world around, “representing our Lord among them and them before our Lord,” III/4, 102, and thus its prayer includes those for whom Jesus Christ is still a stranger, *TCL*, 100.

<sup>238</sup> III/4, 485.

<sup>239</sup> IV/2, 620.

<sup>240</sup> IV/3, 718.

<sup>241</sup> IV/3, 793.

<sup>242</sup> IV/3, 834. Barth asserts that in the divine service of the community, “there is a serious discharge of its commission to be a provisional representation of humanity as it is sanctified in Jesus Christ,” IV/2, 698. He therefore asserts: “that it is on the right way in its serving of the cause of Jesus Christ, may in certain encounters and phenomena shine out with the brightness, if also the transience, of a flash of lightning, so that it can never again be forgotten,” IV/3, 841.

*i) a Christological actualism*

The actualistic nature of conformity is grounded in the nature of the grace of God. For Barth, grace is “a being and action of God upon which no one and nothing has any claim.”<sup>243</sup> For this reason, Barth therefore expressly condemns the Roman Catholic conception of divine grace as “a gift of God which He might give or not give, or an attribute which might be imputed to Him or not be imputed.”<sup>244</sup> Instead, he posits that “grace is the very essence of the being of God.”<sup>245</sup> This view has immediate consequences for Christology. Barth argues that there can be no question of a *habitus* of grace proper to the human essence of Jesus Christ,<sup>246</sup> for

[W]hat *habitus* could either belong or be ascribed to Him in His relationship to the grace of God? The grace of the Father’s Yes and the Spirit’s power a *habitus*! Even the man Jesus of Nazareth exists in a concrete history as its recipient.<sup>247</sup>

Hence for Barth, the power and continuity in which the human Jesus of Nazareth reveals the Word of God consists “in the power and continuity of the divine action in this form and not in the continuity of this form as such.”<sup>248</sup> Jüngel comments in this regard that

[T]he exaltation of human nature which takes places in the history of Jesus must therefore not be thought of as a status (*Zuständlichkeit*). That would be an abstraction from that history and therefore from God as the Subject of that history.<sup>249</sup>

Therefore Barth concludes that the grace of office or service or work addressed in Jesus Christ to human essence “is a history and not an appropriated state.”<sup>250</sup>

*ii) the actualism of justification*

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<sup>243</sup> II/1, 354.

<sup>244</sup> II/1, 356.

<sup>245</sup> II/1, 356.

<sup>246</sup> IV/2, 90. For Barth, “righteousness in the Bible is not a constitution and state conceived as an idea or decree, but a deed and action, inseparable from the conception of a human person,” II/2, 690-691. McCormack notes correspondingly that “the history of the human Jesus is a history of obedience to the will of the Father,” in “Barths grundsätzlicher Chalkedonismus?,” 165.

<sup>247</sup> IV/2, 94.

<sup>248</sup> I/1, 323.

<sup>249</sup> Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 241.

<sup>250</sup> IV/2, 99. Instead, Barth is adamant that in the history which Jesus Christ lives, “the good-pleasure of the Father, the gift of the Spirit and His own existence as the Son of God must always mean something new and specific at every step,” IV/2, 94. And therefore the history of the acts of Jesus Christ is for Barth one of ever renewed beginnings,” I/1, 322.

The same actualistic construal of human essence is analogically replicated in Barth's theological anthropology. In the history of the ethical agent, grace is not something that can be infused or stored, let alone merited: instead, it must be received afresh in every new moment. Barth writes that grace cannot be possessed "outside the divine giving and his receiving at God's hand."<sup>251</sup> And therefore grace is something that "takes place afresh each day, like the food given to the Israelites in the wilderness."<sup>252</sup>

In justification, then, the relationship between God and the ethical agent is for Barth never static but is rather always dynamic.<sup>253</sup> Barth writes that "[T]here is no present in which the justification of man is not still this beginning of justification,"<sup>254</sup> for "[E]very morning and every evening his situation is one of departure in the very midst of sin."<sup>255</sup> Hence Barth laments that "[F]reedom is given us, and we are always grasping after empty possibilities, acting as though we were still prisoners,"<sup>256</sup> and observes with regret "that daily drowning of Adam which is always so doubtful a matter because he can unfortunately swim."<sup>257</sup> And therefore, Barth writes of the new individual created by the call of Jesus Christ that

... although his sin and guilt are indeed behind him, they are behind him in such a way that they are still a potent factor in the present, so that he must continually receive afresh his freedom from them.<sup>258</sup>

It is, for Barth, in Jesus Christ that the justification of the ethical agent is complete, and not in herself.<sup>259</sup> The ethical agent is thus, by grace, in a movement from the subordinate, static and present, to the superior, dynamic and future: from what the Gospel sees her to be in herself in virtue of her ignorance, to what it also sees her to

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<sup>251</sup> III/4, 663.

<sup>252</sup> *TCL*, 77.

<sup>253</sup> IV/1, 545.

<sup>254</sup> IV/1, 575.

<sup>255</sup> IV/1, 583. Even in her best works, then, the ethical agent "still stands in continual need of justification before God," IV/2, 504. And therefore, Barth writes, Christians are "those who constantly stand in need of reawakening and who depend upon the fact that they are continually reawakened," IV/2, 555. For Barth, the Church as a whole is engaged in the same movement: "the Christian community both as a whole and individually will always be somewhere on the way in the movement from yesterday to to-morrow, and therefore *Deo bene volente* from the worse to the better," IV/2, 716.

<sup>256</sup> IV/2, 364.

<sup>257</sup> III/2, 631. Barth acknowledges that there is no one who "has not continually shown traces of his original uncalled condition, who has not been only too like the godless in specific respects, who has not denied his election," II/2, 348.

<sup>258</sup> IV/3, 531.

<sup>259</sup> IV/1, 557. It is, for Barth, a matter of "*iustitia aliena*, because first and essentially it is *iustitia Christi*, and only as such *nostra, mea iustitia*," IV/1, 549.



be in virtue of the work of God and the Word of God addressed to her ignorance.<sup>260</sup>

iii) the actualism of sanctification

This actualistic construal of justification has profound implications for the concept of sanctification, with which, for Barth, it forms a unity in distinction.<sup>261</sup> The awakening to conversion of the ethical agent that characterises sanctification is not a momentary matter, but is rather a movement which extends over the whole of her life, becoming the content and character of the whole act of that life.<sup>262</sup> This means that the conversion of the ethical agent, “in which he is simultaneously both [*iustus et peccator*], is an event, an act, a history.”<sup>263</sup> Barth therefore posits that the call to discipleship always summons the ethical agent to take a definite first step which “involves a right-about turn and therefore a complete break and a new beginning,”<sup>264</sup> and that “strictly speaking, we can engage only in continual beginnings of resistance, in continually new steps in the allotted direction.”<sup>265</sup> He forcefully states that

[T]he invocation ‘Our Father,’ and all the Christian life and ethos implicit in this invocation, can never at any stage or in any form be anything but the work of beginners. ... What Christians do becomes a self-contradiction when it takes the form of a trained and mastered routine, of a learned and practiced art.<sup>266</sup>

Thus it is the case for Barth that “[I]n Jesus Christ a Christian has already come into being, but in himself and his time he is always in the process of becoming.”<sup>267</sup>

The same is true for the sanctification of the community, which in truth for Barth is

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<sup>260</sup> IV/3, 809.

<sup>261</sup> IV/2, 508.

<sup>262</sup> IV/2, 566.

<sup>263</sup> IV/2, 572. Gerhard Ebeling thus notes that for all the similarities, the use Barth makes of the formula *simul iustus et peccator* is different to that of Luther, “Über die Reformation hinaus?,” 53.

<sup>264</sup> IV/2, 538.

<sup>265</sup> *TCL*, 175. This means, for Barth, a daily exercise of self-denial, IV/2, 538. Barth writes that “[E]ach new day we must cease to be non-Christians and begin to be Christians. Each new day we need the Holy Spirit for this purpose,” IV/2, 328. This captures the sense in which conversion is, for Barth, both a divine work and a creaturely work, IV/2, 557. However, the divine work is clearly primary, as Barth affirms that “[I]t will always be necessary that the good work of the Holy Spirit which has begun thus or thus should begin again at the beginning,” IV/4, 39. It is no surprise, then, that Barth rejects the concept of an *ordo salutis* of differentiated steps, IV/2, 502 and IV/3, 506, writing instead that “the *status gratiae et salutis* ... will always be even at best and in every stage of life, including the last, a *status nascendi*,” IV/3, 674.

<sup>266</sup> *TCL*, 79.

<sup>267</sup> IV/2, 307.

the primary referent of sanctification, in that sanctification occurs as “God fashions a people of holy men.”<sup>268</sup> Barth states that in the upbuilding or sanctification of the community, “[A]ll further building must be a fresh building from the very first, from the foundation upwards.”<sup>269</sup> In this actualistic framework, the sanctification of the community is an event, effected in covenant history by the command of God.<sup>270</sup>

This actualistic construal of the Christian life may seem to jeopardise any meaningful continuity in terms of the ethical agent. However, Barth notes that God preserves the creature to participate in the work of salvation, and for this participation “it must be able to be; it must have permanence and continuity.”<sup>271</sup> Moreover, Barth emphasises both the ontic grounding of the ethical agent in the eternal election of Jesus Christ, in which is found “the unity of this steadfastness both divine and human,”<sup>272</sup> and the reality and continuity of the work of the Holy Spirit, and thence the reality and the continuity of faith and love.<sup>273</sup> Barth therefore writes that

[N]ew and fresh each morning is the grace and the great faithfulness of the Lord ... Their life as Christians has no guarantee but this. But it does have this guarantee, and with this guarantee it has continuity and they constantly have the freedom of the children of God to call upon God as the one he is, as their Father.<sup>274</sup>

As William Werpehowski has argued, then, the identity and history of the ethical agent is stabilised in the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> IV/2, 511. Barth observes that “[S]anctity belongs to them, but only in their common life, not as individuals,” IV/2, 513.

<sup>269</sup> IV/2, 631.

<sup>270</sup> III/4, 4. At the same time, Barth stresses that the grace of sanctification, and therefore of Jesus Christ generally, is alien to the community if it does not ask “concerning true Church law as the true ordering of its worship,” IV/2, 709. Barth therewith emphasises the import of Church discipline, but merely raises the questions involved and does not himself explore any material answers, IV/2, 710.

<sup>271</sup> III/3, 79. Barth observes that “God lives, speaks and guides, and therefore man lives before God and his character has a history in which for all its mutability there is increase, decrease, change and novelty,” III/4, 389.

<sup>272</sup> II/2, 125. Trevor Hart notes correctly at this point that “[I]nsofar as there is any genuine continuity to be acknowledged between God and humanity, it is from moment to moment a matter of God’s gracious action in the life of the particular creature, and never something which the creature possesses as such,” *Regarding Karl Barth*, 143.

<sup>273</sup> I/2, 400. By contrast, Barth writes of the Holy Spirit as being “the special movement and act in which certain people ... [are] obedient to him not once alone but again and again, in the continuity of their human existence on the basis of this special movement and act of God,” *TCL*, 90. This seems to address the concern of Klaas Runia, who complains that there is no room for a continuity of faith in the *Church Dogmatics*, and posits the question, “[I]s there not more than an endless dotted line of separate acts of faith?,” *Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, 28.

<sup>274</sup> *TCL*, 94-95.

<sup>275</sup> Werpehowski, “Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth,” 316, in rejoinder to the critique

It has been observed, however, that Barth writes little on the matter of progress in sanctification or in the Christian life. George Hunsinger is quite critical of Barth at this point, positing that

Barth knew how to highlight the 'once-for-all' and the 'again and again' aspects of our dying and rising with Christ, but unfortunately failed to do justice to the 'more and more' aspect as well.<sup>276</sup>

He laments that "[O]ver against the traditional view of his brother Peter, Karl took the radical position that there is no such thing as progress in sanctification."<sup>277</sup> Hunsinger argues that while Barth did not rule out growth or progress in the Christian life, in contrast to Luther and Calvin he devotes little attention to them.<sup>278</sup> Yet there are passages - as Hunsinger himself notes<sup>279</sup> - where Barth hints at a theology which incorporates progress in sanctification. Barth writes, for example, that to live a holy life is "to live in conversion with growing sincerity, depth and precision,"<sup>280</sup> and asks in respect of the Christian community:

[W]here do we not have to make this way from good to better faith and knowledge and confession, to better thought and penitence and joy, to better prayer and hope and proclamation and worship ... , in short from good to better communion of the saints in holy things?<sup>281</sup>

Indeed, Barth observes that "[N]othing is more astonishing than the true, intensive, spiritual growth of the communion of saints on earth."<sup>282</sup>

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of Barth by Stanley Hauerwas expressed in *Character and the Christian Life*, 171-177, a rejoinder broadly accepted by Hauerwas in "On Honour," 148-149.

<sup>276</sup> Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 274-275.

<sup>277</sup> Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 298. Hunsinger complains that "it seems undeniable that in Barth's soteriology this aspect is underdeveloped and excessively diminished," *Disruptive Grace*, 168, and suggests that while both Barth could speak of spiritual progress, his emphasis is characteristically elsewhere, *Disruptive Grace*, 300. Willis laments that Barth "never allows for a definite or persistent enough embodiment of obedience (i.e., freedom exhibited in faith, love and hope) in the action of the Christian to move him beyond the basic act of worship," *Ethics*, 271. Two initial reservations might be raised against Willis here: first, that he seems to be guilty of a category error in desiring an action to be embodied; and second, that for Barth no right action is performed without a sense of worship.

<sup>278</sup> George Hunsinger, "A Tale of Two Simultaneities: Justification and Sanctification in Calvin and Barth," in *Conversing with Barth*, eds. John C. McDowell and Mike Higton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 86.

<sup>279</sup> Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 274 cites IV/2, 631, while "Karl Barth's doctrine of the Holy Spirit," 194 n.15 cites IV/2, 566 and 794.

<sup>280</sup> IV/2, 566.

<sup>281</sup> IV/2, 648-649.

<sup>282</sup> IV/2, 650.

The question thus arises of what this ‘spiritual growth’ might mean for Barth in light of his strongly actualistic conception of the Christian life. It seems helpful at this stage to draw on the distinction that has guided much of this chapter between the divine work and the human work in action at this point. On the one hand, then, Barth observes that the power by which the community grows and lives is only ever that of the Holy Spirit.<sup>283</sup> On the other hand, Barth is clear that in her genuine humanity, the ethical agent is summoned to faith, obedience, gratitude, humility, and joy.<sup>284</sup>

This distinction between divine action and human action suggests a way to construe of spiritual growth within Barth’s actualistic ontology. Within the history of the Christian life in which the ethical agent encounters God, there seems to be demanded of the ethical agent a creaturely *habitus* of right practice - of openness to and obedience of the command of God. In this way, as Lovin notes, obedient action is “a pattern of living responsibly within the order which God is creating in the human world.”<sup>285</sup> Faithfulness in following Jesus Christ in this creaturely *habitus* of right practice and responsible living is not static but dynamic, which leaves room for progress (and also for regress) in the history of the life of the ethical agent. Within this living existence of openness and obedience, as Werpehowski notes, the ethical agent would be able “ever more concretely to learn how that existence is claimed by the gracious God.”<sup>286</sup> What remains a feature of this creaturely history, however, is the newness with which the command and grace of God encounter the individual each day and each hour. Barth emphasises that those who are sanctified are “saints, not *propria*, but *aliena sanctitate; sanctitate Jesu Christi*,”<sup>287</sup> and that this

<sup>283</sup> IV/2, 651. Barth is adamant that the ethical agent surrenders her Christian freedom and denies herself as a Christian, if she tries to seek the basis of her being as a Christian in herself, IV/2, 308.

<sup>284</sup> II/1, 550.

<sup>285</sup> Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 40.

<sup>286</sup> Werpehowski, “Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth,” 315. There is clearly some connection here with Hunsinger’s proposal that “what would be seen as existing in a process of becoming would not be one’s ‘salvation’ as a goal yet to be attained by degrees, but one’s ‘existential appropriation’ of the salvation that has already been given and received by faith,” *Disruptive Grace*, 275 n.32. And there is also a connection with Biggar’s view that for Barth “[T]here is continuity and growth in the moral life of the Christian, but only epiphenomenally, only as a by-product of our repeated obedience,” *Hastening*, 138.

<sup>287</sup> IV/2, 518. Within this actualistic ontology, then, there is no place to satisfy the desire of Katherine Sonderegger that Barth endorse “the presence and effective working of a gift in and to us, by which we undergo and see within us the passing away of the old self and the dying into Christ,” in “Sanctification as Imputation in the Doctrine of Karl Barth,” in *ZdTh* 18.3 (2002), 314.

sanctification is something that is “*given* to men ... in their participation in the sanctity of the One who alone is holy.”<sup>288</sup> Barth correspondingly writes that while in the history of the faithful there is a progressive building on that which is already built, “[E]very step forward includes a repetition of those already taken.”<sup>289</sup> The self-determination of the ethical agent always occurs within the same ‘formed’ reference to the ethical event, but it proceeds ever anew in response to the present command of God.

Fundamental to this self-determination is the direction of the Holy Spirit, calling the ethical agent “continually to begin there with the beginning which they themselves have not made but which has been made of them, and from which they can proceed only in one direction.”<sup>290</sup> As Biggar notes with acuity, then, for Barth “moral formation always lies in front of the moral agent, and never simply behind him.”<sup>291</sup> Barth himself observes ruefully how great a step obedience involves, and that “even when this step has been taken once, it has to be taken again and again in all its difficulty.”<sup>292</sup> This actualistic construal of sanctification and the Christian life is for Barth neither a weakness nor a regret, but a blessing. He thus writes that

[T]he fact that in our need we look to God in Jesus Christ and listen to His Word and then love God afresh and this time truly, is something which, if it happens, we can only accept as grace.<sup>293</sup>

Barth argues therefore that in Jesus Christ, the individual “can now live only in daily conversion, but may do so quite unafraid.”<sup>294</sup>

#### *iv) the actualism of vocation*

<sup>288</sup> IV/2, 518, emphasis added. Of themselves, then, they are merely “disturbed sinners,” IV/2, 524.

<sup>289</sup> IV/2, 631.

<sup>290</sup> IV/2, 366.

<sup>291</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 135-136. He correctly continues that “[C]haracter is given primarily as an end, a *telos*, and not even as one whose nature may be fully grasped in advance,” *Hastening*, 136.

<sup>292</sup> II/2, 624.

<sup>293</sup> I/2, 438. In this way, then, Barth asserts that “authentic, utterly certain and hidden faith is always in transition from expectation to fresh expectation,” I/1, 231. And consequently, for Barth, “[I]t must not be a cause of regret or too little a thing for us in faith always to be only on the way,” II/1, 201.

<sup>294</sup> IV/3, 247. Bruce McCormack sagely observes that “[I]f there is indeed a flaw in Barth’s doctrine of sanctification with regard to where he situates ‘continuity and development’, then it will be necessary to take him on all along the line - i.e. in relation to his doctrines of election and Christology as well,” in “Afterword,” in *ZdTh* 18.3 (2002), 369.



To complete this actualistic construal of the Christian life, Barth writes of vocation as the event in which the ethical agent is called by Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>295</sup> The goal of the event of vocation is that she might become and thereafter remain a Christian,<sup>296</sup> a child of God,<sup>297</sup> in union with Christ.<sup>298</sup> For Barth, this event has “the character of a free act of grace on the side of God and a free decision on that of man.”<sup>299</sup> However, it is characterised by Barth as an event which not only takes place once-for-all,<sup>300</sup> but which, in true actualistic fashion, “must take place again and again.”<sup>301</sup> For Barth, then, as a call to ongoing discipleship, vocation is “not merely *vocatio unica* but also *vocatio continua*.”<sup>302</sup>

## D - summary

For Barth, the moral field is, as John Webster notes, “a diverse pattern of correspondences or analogies, of similarities and dissimilarities, between the actions of God and human actions.”<sup>303</sup> Within this moral field, the action of the ethical agent is sanctified by God as it conforms to Jesus Christ in faith, obedience, and prayer. In this event is found that ethical conformity which is commanded of the ethical agent, and which they are able to achieve in limitation but also in reality. As Barth notes, then, Christians “are indispensable ordinary little people with the task of doing here or there, in this way or that, what is entrusted to them and demanded of them.”<sup>304</sup> In construing the Christian life in this way, Barth brings to the fore the truth that the Christian life is a life lived in action and self-determination in which the ethical agent is continually called to receive and correspond to her election. As such, it is a life lived in a history of continuous encounter with the God of the covenant of grace.

<sup>295</sup> IV/3, 519. As with her justification and her sanctification, for Barth her vocation is already true in the work of reconciliation effected in the history of Jesus Christ, IV/3, 486, although clearly there is no question for Barth of “a vocation of Jesus Himself,” IV/3, 503.

<sup>296</sup> IV/3, 521.

<sup>297</sup> IV/3, 533.

<sup>298</sup> IV/3, 548.

<sup>299</sup> IV/3, 486.

<sup>300</sup> IV/3, 517.

<sup>301</sup> IV/3, 494. Barth argues that the calling of the ethical agent “stands in need of constant repetition and renewal, and therefore never stands so fully behind him that it is not also before him,” IV/3, 496. This corresponds to the fact that for Barth, nothing higher or better - a ‘regeneration’ or a ‘conversion’ - has to follow vocation in order to deepen or complete it, IV/3, 511.

<sup>302</sup> IV/3, 536.

<sup>303</sup> Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 177.

<sup>304</sup> *TCL*, 98.



## **Section Three -**

### **Telic Aspects of Ethical Agency**



## **§8 The Telos of Ethical Action**

*... in our very existence we become a sign and testimony. - Barth<sup>1</sup>*

This final chapter considers the telos of the ethical agent in her correspondence to the will of God. Barth is clear that there is no independent teleology of the creature by virtue of its creation: rather, its destiny “lies entirely in the purpose of its Creator as the One Who speaks and cares for it.”<sup>2</sup> In exploring this destiny, this chapter focuses on matters immanent and present rather than transcendent and eschatological, and thus investigates the earthly consequences of obedience to the command of God for the ethical agent. The chapter proceeds by examining in turn the concepts of participation, witness, and glorification as they are employed in Barth’s description of conformity to Jesus Christ.

### **A - conformity as participation**

Participation in the glory of the Creator is, for Barth, “the goal and content, the expression and fulness, the meaning and order of the existence of the elect.”<sup>3</sup> This first section considers this concept of participation under three headings: first, participation as knowledge; second, participation as action; and third, participation without divinisation.

#### *i) participation as knowledge*

There is an important noetic dimension to participation in the *Church Dogmatics*. Barth writes that the individual “can and must, within the limits which are his lot, participate in the knowledge of God,”<sup>4</sup> for “[A]s human life is a being in

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<sup>1</sup> I/2, 414.

<sup>2</sup> III/1, 94.

<sup>3</sup> II/2, 411.

<sup>4</sup> II/1, 201.

responsibility before God, it has the character of a knowledge of God.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, however, the potential for this participation in the knowledge of God does not lie in the ethical agent herself. Barth cautions that

... the hiddenness of God remains. We do not encroach upon Him by knowing Him; we do not of ourselves become like Him; we do not of ourselves become master of Him; we do not of ourselves become one with Him. And all this means - we cannot of ourselves apprehend Him.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore the knowledge of God is only possible by the divine grace, in which “[G]iving us a share in His knowledge He loves us, He draws us to Himself, He upholds us to prevent us from falling again, He makes Himself ours and us His.”<sup>7</sup> As Joseph Mangina notes, then, for Barth “[T]he knowledge of God is presented as nothing less than an effective participation in God.”<sup>8</sup>

Barth notes actualistically that this “participation in the self-knowledge of God in His Son ... is always a gift of participation,”<sup>9</sup> and correspondingly, this participation is always “an event in which we really have to do with God Himself.”<sup>10</sup> Barth thus cautions that “if our knowledge of this fact from its self-revelation is not new every morning, if it is not newly received from it, with empty hands, as a new gift, it is not this knowledge at all.”<sup>11</sup> In the event of grace, this participation in knowledge of God is indirect,<sup>12</sup> to the extent that God thinks proper and suitable,<sup>13</sup> a creaturely share in a creaturely manner.<sup>14</sup> The assurance of human knowledge of God is thus utterly dependent on its divine actualisation, and hence can only be the assurance of faith.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> III/2, 176.

<sup>6</sup> II/1, 194.

<sup>7</sup> II/1, 546. This participation is possible only in and through Jesus Christ, who is “the knowability of God on our side, as He is the grace of God itself, and therefore also the knowability of God on God’s side,” II/1, 150. Therefore Barth writes that “[T]he Word of God in which He gives Himself to be known by us is none other than that in which He knows Himself,” I/1, 435.

<sup>8</sup> Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 66. Dalferth correspondingly observes that for Barth, “the epistemological model of theological knowledge ... is not knowledge by description but knowledge by acquaintance, not propositional knowledge based on the authority of the Church’s teaching but personal participation in God’s self-communication which precedes and grounds all human testimony and teaching,” in “Karl Barth’s eschatological realism,” 21.

<sup>9</sup> II/1, 56.

<sup>10</sup> II/1, 181.

<sup>11</sup> IV/2, 124. Barth observes that human knowledge of God “has not grasped at this participation; it can only receive it. Nor can it control this participation; it can only be continually given it,” IV/3, 220.

<sup>12</sup> II/1, 59.

<sup>13</sup> II/1, 51.

<sup>14</sup> III/2, 177.

<sup>15</sup> I/1, 224.

Nevertheless, Barth asserts that there takes place in this human knowledge a genuine human action, precisely in participation in the divine action.<sup>16</sup>

*ii) participation as action*

Barth writes that “[I]n making Himself known, God acts on the whole man.”<sup>17</sup> The second dimension of participation is therefore ontic, founded on the being of the ethical agent in Jesus Christ. This ontic view is firmly grounded in Barth’s actualistic ontology, and therefore focuses on the dynamic categories of action and event. However, a clear distinction must be drawn between two different aspects of the word ‘participation’ in the *Church Dogmatics*. On the one hand, there is that participation in Jesus Christ which is true of individuals in light of the divine election and the history of Jesus Christ. In this passive mode, Barth writes that simply by virtue of being human, the individual “has his Head in the man Jesus, and shares in the battle fought and the history of triumph inaugurated by Him.”<sup>18</sup> This might be called the participation of the ethical agent in Jesus Christ in respect of the Gospel. On the other hand, however, there is that participation in Jesus Christ which involves the active correspondence of the ethical agent to her original determination, that is, her response to the (passive) participation that is already objectively real in Jesus Christ. In this active mode, the will of God is done “as God participates in the creature, and enables it to participate in Himself, and in the purpose and direction of

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<sup>16</sup> IV/3, 220. Barth writes of “the human *action* which we call the knowledge of God,” II/1, 204, emphasis added. Colin Gunton makes the point that human knowledge of God is not the conditioned reflex of an automaton, but is rather “free personal action in relation,” in “No Other Foundation,” in *Reckoning with Barth*, ed. Nigel Biggar (London: Mowbray, 1988), 69, while Jane Barter notes that “[T]he Christian is called by Christ into active knowledge of the truth. The modifier *active*, denotes precisely the agential nature of knowledge,” in “A Theology of Liberation in Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* IV/3,” in *SJT* 53.2 (2000), 156. Barth is correspondingly clear that this knowledge “does not mean either the abrogation, abolition or alteration of human cognition as such, and therefore of its formal and technical characteristics as human cognition,” II/1, 181.

<sup>17</sup> IV/3, 510. McDowell notes that revelation is for Barth both cognitive and causative, *Hope in Barth’s Eschatology*, 162. It is thus curious that Gerhard Ebeling writes, in the context of revelation and its recognition, of “Barth’s sharp separation of ‘noetic’ and ‘ontic’,” in “Über die Reformation hinaus?,” 63 n.97.

<sup>18</sup> III/2, 146. Barth posits that “[T]here is no one, therefore, who does not participate in Him [Jesus Christ] in this turning to God,” IV/2, 271. McCormack comments that as a result, “‘participation’ in Christ is not something that has first to be realized by means of an independent work of the Holy Spirit but is already real even as the God-man carries out his work,” in “*Justitia Aliena*,” 26-27. What is decisive for this sense of participation is, as McCormack notes, “the eternal divine *determination*,” in “*Justitia Aliena*,” 28.

His works.”<sup>19</sup> This might be called the participation of the ethical agent in Jesus Christ in respect of the Law. Mangina writes in respect of these modes that “all people virtually, and Christians in the mode of active response, are given a share in God’s life through Jesus Christ.”<sup>20</sup> It is the latter mode which forms the telos of theological ethics and which merits further discussion.

Ethical participation in Christ is construed by Barth actualistically in two respects. First, it is a participation which only occurs as a gift of the grace of God. For Barth, the existence of the ethical agent,

... as an active participation in what God does and means for him, is an event in which he renders God service, in which he for his part is for God, because God first willed to bind Himself to man, and in so doing has bound man to Himself.<sup>21</sup>

It is his determination to blessedness that God actively draws the elect individual “into the event of His own life and act and work - that God wills to use him also.”<sup>22</sup> Barth thus posits that it is allowed and granted to the ethical agent in discipleship “to participate in the existence of Jesus, in the salvation manifested in Him, and in His passion - that is what following is.”<sup>23</sup> Second, it is a participation which is only realised in the event of action. Barth is clear that “active participation is implied when man is called to the service of the kingdom and fatherly providence of God.”<sup>24</sup>

Barth asks

[H]ow can it be a participation in His [Jesus Christ’s] life, a fulfilment of the covenant fellowship secured for men by Him, if it is not active participation in His love, His act, His work, if man remains only an object of the glory of God, and does not become subject?<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> III/3, 286.

<sup>20</sup> Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 71.

<sup>21</sup> III/2, 74. Barth writes that “we for our part, as history in partnership is the portion which is allotted us in His free grace, genuinely exist in participation in Himself, in His triune life, and in the problem of this life, and its answer and solution,” IV/2, 346. Barth notes this participation in the person and work of Jesus Christ is portrayed in Scripture as a work of the Holy Spirit, II/1, 157. It thus seems curious for Ben Quash to lament that “Barth resists ... the ability of the creature to *participate* in Christ’s work,” in “Exile, Freedom and Thanksgiving,” in *Conversing with Barth*, eds. John C. McDowell and Mike Higon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 111.

<sup>22</sup> II/2, 413. It remains, for Barth, a possibility of God that the ethical agent “is enabled to participate not just passively but actively in God’s grace,” IV/4, 6. Nevertheless, this does occur: Barth affirms that “[A]ctive participation in the hallowing of God’s name is thus an idea and concept that we are not to reject, but to adopt and validate,” *TCL*, 170.

<sup>23</sup> I/2, 277.

<sup>24</sup> III/4, 482.

<sup>25</sup> II/2, 413. Hence, in answer to the question of what it means to be loved by God, Barth responds,



As the individual corresponds as a subject to his true and divinely-determined self, Barth asserts that both his being *and* his actions “will consist in his participation in what God does and means for him.”<sup>26</sup>

In describing this active participation in Jesus Christ, Barth draws a clear and consistent link to right ethical action, asserting that “it is in the particular goodness of the work of God that a man may participate with his own good works.”<sup>27</sup> Hence Daniel Migliore posits that “Christian life is a *participatio Christi* in the active, agential, ethical sense of free and glad participation in the service of Jesus Christ and his work of reconciliation.”<sup>28</sup> So, for example, Barth writes that the human act of faith “is simple and direct - a participating in Jesus Christ and in His work of grace and salvation.”<sup>29</sup> Again, Barth asserts that “God gives us to participate in the love in which as Father He loves the Son and as Son the Father, making our action a reflection of the eternal love.”<sup>30</sup> And Barth notes that in the prayers of the community, “the community participates in Him [Jesus Christ], in His life as the Lord.”<sup>31</sup> Barth concludes that

... at the very point where man himself is called to freedom by the will and work of God, we find that man is also summoned, mobilised and thrown into action in participation in the doing of this will and work.<sup>32</sup>

In respect of Jesus Christ, then, “life in relationship to him, in his discipleship, in obedience to him as the Lord, will always consist in union with this work of his.”<sup>33</sup>

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“participation in the life of God in a human existence in which there is a representation and illustration of the glory of God Himself and its work,” II/2, 413.

<sup>26</sup> III/2, 74.

<sup>27</sup> IV/2, 594.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Migliore, “Participatio Christi: The Central Theme of Barth’s Doctrine of Sanctification,” in *ZdTh* 18.3 (2002), 291.

<sup>29</sup> III/3, 247.

<sup>30</sup> IV/2, 778-779.

<sup>31</sup> III/3, 277.

<sup>32</sup> III/4, 481.

<sup>33</sup> *TCL*, 64. Alan Torrance similarly argues that participation in Jesus Christ means “a) participation in *his* worship of the Father in the Spirit; b) participation in *his* knowledge of the Father in the Spirit; c) participation in *his* mission from the Father to the world in the Spirit,” *Persons in Communion*, 360. Barth correspondingly writes that as a result of the gracious will of God, “although the Christian attitude is still a creaturely movement it acquires a share in the universal lordship of God, so that that lordship has a place and is actualised not merely in the higher sphere but also in the attitude of the Christian. ... The creature, man, the Christian acquires a share in the matter simply by believing, by obeying, and finally and supremely by praying, and therefore by asking. The share is given him by God,” III/3, 285.

This actualistic construal of participation in Jesus Christ is already and fundamentally grounded in the body of Jesus Christ - the Church. Barth writes that "[O]ur participation in the person and work of Jesus Christ takes place by the fact that we are in the Church, that we ourselves are the Church."<sup>34</sup> And Barth argues that "as the people we are we have to participate in that work of the Word."<sup>35</sup> The work of this community thus involves "participation in His commission and therefore among men and in the service of men."<sup>36</sup> It is thus in the event of obedient participation in the work of Jesus Christ within the community that human ethical action corresponds in limitation - but also in reality - to the event of the history of Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup>

### *iii) participation without divinisation*

Throughout his writing on participation, Barth remains adamant that the ethical agent participates in Jesus Christ without being divinised. He writes that while Scripture reads that the promises of Jesus Christ are to be given to Christians that they might become 'partakers of the divine nature',

[T]he exhortation that follows shows plainly that the author here is not speaking of anything more than the practical fellowship of Christians with God and on this basis the conformity of their acts with the divine nature.<sup>38</sup>

To understand properly Barth's notion of non-divinising participation at this point, it is necessary first to return briefly to his Christology.

Barth writes of Jesus Christ that "it is His very participation in the divine which is

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<sup>34</sup> II/1, 160.

<sup>35</sup> I/2, 275.

<sup>36</sup> III/4, 477. This construal of participation and correspondence as service is pivotal in the concept of the active life which Barth develops in his theological ethics, III/4, 475-483. Barth notes elsewhere that "[I]f we ask about the meaning and direction of the life of the elect, ... we have to reply that the elect lives as such in so far as he is there on behalf of others," II/2, 423. Johnson correspondingly posits that "[U]nion with Christ is, first, a union with Christ's mission. Second, it is a union with Christ's work in the community ... Third, union with Christ is a participation in the wide context of the unfolding reign of God in the world," *The Mystery of God*, 148.

<sup>37</sup> The distinction between human ethical action and the work of Jesus Christ remains carefully guarded, for Barth writes that human active participation "does not mean that he becomes a co-creator, co-saviour or co-regent in God's activity," III/4, 482. Barth even suggests at one point that "we do better to renounce at once this idea of the participation of men in what God does," *TCL*, 171. Nevertheless, it remains the case, as Willis notes, that "[T]he direction set for all men ... is participation in God's own action," *Ethics*, 154-155.

<sup>38</sup> *TCL*, 28.

the basis of His humanity.”<sup>39</sup> However, Barth is also clear that “this mystery of the participation of Jesus in the Godhead is not at all the dissolution but the very foundation of His true humanity.”<sup>40</sup> Barth therefore concludes that

[E]ven in their unity in Jesus Christ himself, God does not cease to be God nor man to be man. Their distinction even in their unity in Jesus Christ typifies the qualitative and definitive distinction between God and every other man.<sup>41</sup>

Barth explains that any construal of a ‘mutual participation’ of the divine nature and the human nature in Jesus Christ must preserve the irreversibility of their relation: “[T]he determination of His divine essence is *to* His human, and the determination of His human essence is *from* His divine.”<sup>42</sup> And therefore, while it is correct to argue that as human, Jesus Himself is the Son of God and therefore of divine essence, this does not mean that “the human essence assumed by the Son of God and united therefore with His divine essence became and is divine essence.”<sup>43</sup> Rather, that which is imparted to the human essence in the incarnation is to be sought “in a determination in which it is always human essence,”<sup>44</sup> namely, as a determination “wholly and utterly, from the very outset and in every part, by the electing grace of God.”<sup>45</sup> Hence, as Bruce McCormack notes, “the mode of ‘participation’ of the human Jesus in the being and existence of God is that of ‘sharing’ in His history through active obedience to the will of the Father.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> III/2, 66.

<sup>40</sup> III/2, 66.

<sup>41</sup> *TCL*, 27-28. Barth writes that divinisation of historical and natural forces “is unthinkable even in the case of the human word of the Bible, or the human nature of Jesus Christ Himself,” I/2, 683. And Eberhard Jüngel notes that “[E]xaltation of human essence to God is not, however, the divinisation of humanity. ... For in the true humanity of Jesus Christ, it is a question for Barth of the exaltation of human being to the honour, worth, and majesty of the divine being. ... Yet the human being is not divinised by it by it,” *Barth-Studien*, 241-242.

<sup>42</sup> IV/2, 70. Only with this qualification is there a real participation of the Son of God in human essence and of the Son of Man in divine essence, IV/2, 74-75. This qualified mutual participation is understood only as an event and as a history, IV/2, 75. It is not clear that Hunsinger’s language of a “mutual indwelling of Christ’s two natures,” in “Karl Barth’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit,” 187, effectively communicates this important irreversibility.

<sup>43</sup> IV/2, 71.

<sup>44</sup> IV/2, 72.

<sup>45</sup> IV/2, 88.

<sup>46</sup> McCormack, “Barth’s grundsätzlicher Chalkedonismus?,” 165. McCormack contends that any concept of divinisation became impossible for Barth on the grounds of his revised doctrine of election, “Barth’s grundsätzlicher Chalkedonismus?,” 166. Mangina correspondingly notes that “Barth’s notion of participation presupposes a very different pneumatology, Christology, and for that matter ontology from that of the Finns’ ‘union with Christ.’ In particular, the humanity of Christ would seem to play a quite different role in the two conceptions,” *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 88 n.22.

In turning to the participation of the ethical agent in God, there is consequently no question of her being divinised: rather, the question is one of the *humanisation* of the ethical agent. The redemptive will of God does not mean for Barth “the extinguishing of our humanity, but its establishment.”<sup>47</sup> And Barth contends that this honouring of the ethical agent by God “is so high and precious just because it is granted to him as a man.”<sup>48</sup> In common with the human nature of Jesus Christ, participation is thus to be interpreted in terms of human obedience to the divine determination, of human correspondence to the divine will, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Hence Barth writes that sanctification “has nothing whatever to do with deification, but everything with humble subjection to God,”<sup>49</sup> and that “there can be no question of a conformity which means equality, of anything in the nature of a deification of man, of making him a second Christ.”<sup>50</sup> It is rather the case for Barth that “[T]he man born of God or the Spirit, called to service and living in hope, is the man who is no longer self-alienated, and therefore he is real man.”<sup>51</sup> In ethical action, therefore, conformity “is a question of displaying the image of God, and not of the creation of a second God in human form, or of a mixing or changing of the human form into the one divine form.”<sup>52</sup>

In the light of this active construal of participation, it is somewhat surprising to find that George Hunsinger argues that “Barth comes within a hair of the traditional

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<sup>47</sup> IV/1, 14-15.

<sup>48</sup> III/4, 665. Barth notes that genuine human freedom “does not need deification, but it does need the exaltation of our nature by the unique grace of God’s becoming man,” IV/2, 93. Jüngel notes, “It is precisely not the divinisation of the human (as Athanasius thought) but only the humanisation of the human ... which corresponds soteriologically to the incarnation of God,” *Barth-Studien*, 345. As Gary Deddo observes, “[A]s we are sanctified in our relationship with God through and in Jesus Christ, we are humanized, we are personalized, become fully human,” in “The Grammar of Barth’s Theology of Personal Relations,” in *SJT* 47 (1994), 210.

<sup>49</sup> IV/2, 377.

<sup>50</sup> II/2, 577.

<sup>51</sup> IV/3, 942. Mangina observes that “[T]he raising up of human nature in active correspondence to the humanity of Jesus just is our participation in God,” *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 83. Participation thus remains for Barth a thoroughly Christocentric concept, for, as Mangina states, “His theology of participation is thoroughly cruciform; and because cruciform, it constantly reminds us that God maintains his otherness even as he fully gives himself to us,” *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 84.

<sup>52</sup> II/2, 577. Hence Barth comments that “[E]ven in the kingdom of perfection ... we shall not be gods, let alone God Himself. There can certainly be no question of our being or becoming this now,” II/2, 578. Eugene Rogers insists that “Barth sees the human response to God primarily, although he does not put it this way, in terms of deification. That is, only God can properly respond to God,” in “The Eclipse of the Spirit in Karl Barth,” in *Conversing with Barth*, eds. John C. McDowell and Mike Higton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 176. On both counts, however, this view seems utterly misguided.

Eastern Orthodox understanding of salvation as ‘divinisation’ (*theosis*).<sup>53</sup> This claim rests on the basis first of Barth’s positing of a “kinship of being (*Seinsgemeinschaft*)” between God and the ethical agent,<sup>54</sup> and second of Barth’s description of the *unio cum Christo*.<sup>55</sup> Certainly there are passages in the *Church Dogmatics* which might lend themselves to such an interpretation. For example, Barth argues that

[I]n the true manhood of the Son of God, all those who believe in Him are taken up into unity with Him and into the unity of His body on earth. They become partakers by grace of the divine sonship which is proper to Him by nature.<sup>56</sup>

Hunsinger consequently asserts that in the miracle of fellowship between Jesus Christ and the ethical agent, “[T]he human being is affirmed in wholeness, canceled in sin and mere finitude, and taken up into an inconceivable fellowship of participation in the eternal life of God.”<sup>57</sup> However, at the same time, Barth writes expressly that “[W]e must not say anything which would assert, entail and actually include a divine humanity and therefore a divinity of the Christian.”<sup>58</sup> And he posits clearly that in this *unio* there is no “obliteration of the distinction between the Lord and His servant or their respective functions.”<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps the best way of understanding this matter is to note with McCormack that “it is a question of accents.”<sup>60</sup> Hunsinger prioritises the understanding of participation as union over that of participation as correspondence, and is certainly not entirely devoid of support from Barth. However, it is to be wondered whether the actualistic ontology which has been seen in this work to dominate the *Church Dogmatics* genuinely calls for this prioritisation. Barth asks, for example,

<sup>53</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 175.

<sup>54</sup> IV/1, 599-600, *KD* IV/1, 669. The translation ‘kinship’ seems rather suspect here: preferable would seem to be the word ‘community’, on the grounds that the relationship in question is neither natural nor obvious but rather one which is merely ascribed, imparted, and given, IV/1, 600.

<sup>55</sup> IV/3, 538-554.

<sup>56</sup> I/2, 362-363. Or again, Barth asserts that “[O]ur human existence is no longer alone. It is no longer left to itself. But in Jesus Christ it is received and adopted into the deity of God. In Him it has already been raised and cleansed and transfigured into the divine likeness,” II/2, 558.

<sup>57</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 223.

<sup>58</sup> IV/1, 599.

<sup>59</sup> IV/3, 651. Mangina thus observes that “there is famously no warrant in Barth’s thought for the mind’s or soul’s or body’s ascent upward into God. If the latter is what is meant by ‘participation,’ one would have to say that God’s verdict, direction, and promise pre-empt anything of the sort,” *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 82. Barth argues that those who call on God as Father “will never once ... encounter God except as those who are inept, inexperienced, unskilled, and immature, as children in this sense too - little children who are totally unprepared for it,” *TCL*, 79.

<sup>60</sup> McCormack, “Barth’s grundsätzlicher Chalkedonismus?,” 171.



... what is meant by gratitude, and therefore blessedness, and therefore being loved by God? Clearly, participation in the life of God in a human existence and action in which there is a representation of and illustration of the glory of God Himself and its work. There can be no question of anything more.<sup>61</sup>

At the very least, such material suggests that extreme caution must be exercised in reading Barth after any paradigm which hints at a divinisation of the ethical agent.

## **B - conformity as witness**

When the ethical agent corresponds in active obedience to the will of God and therewith responds to and participates in her election in Jesus Christ, she becomes a witness pointing beyond herself and to God. In this section, the concept of witness is explored first in relation to the individual, and second in relation to the Church.

### *i) the witness of the individual*

Barth asserts that “the ministry of witness forms the meaning and scope of the whole of the Christian life.”<sup>62</sup> The divine determination of the individual is to witness to the election of Jesus Christ: “this is the purpose which God has for him, and in the execution of which the meaning and order of his being consist.”<sup>63</sup> Barth notes that “[T]he fact that we are created in the likeness of God means that God has determined us to bear witness to His existence in our existence.”<sup>64</sup> Barth explains that

God wills to rule over man. He wills to take him into His service, to commission him for a share in His own work. He wills to make him a witness of Jesus Christ and therefore a witness of His own glory. But obviously we must now go on to ask what it is that God wants *from* man. ... The divine election is, in the last resort, the determination of man - his determination to this service, this commission, this office of witness.<sup>65</sup>

This witness corresponds for Barth to the great certainty of her hope in Jesus Christ.<sup>66</sup>

At each stage of the *Church Dogmatics*, it is this concept of witness which lies

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<sup>61</sup> II/2, 413.

<sup>62</sup> IV/4, 30.

<sup>63</sup> II/2, 414.

<sup>64</sup> II/1, 188.

<sup>65</sup> II/2, 510. Wolf Krötke correspondingly notes that “[T]he partner of God is not only such a witness in an incidental and exceptional manner. His partnership in the covenant (*Bundespartnerschaft*) is lived fundamentally as witness (*Zeugenschaft*),” in “Gott und Mensch als ‘Partner’,” 169.

<sup>66</sup> IV/3, 919.



foremost in Barth's construal of ethical agency, leading Stanley Hauerwas to suggest that his ethics "might be best characterized as a 'witness ethic,' for that is probably the motif that best sums up the direction and implications of the overall pattern of his thought."<sup>67</sup> In the doctrine of God, Barth posits that the command of God reminds the ethical agent that she belongs to Jesus Christ and demands "the witness of our deeds and life as a confirmation of this fact."<sup>68</sup> In his doctrine of creation, he writes that the point of creation is that "God should have a reflection in which He reflects Himself and in which the image of God as the Creator is revealed, so that through it God is attested, confirmed and proclaimed."<sup>69</sup> In his doctrine of reconciliation, he asserts that in the light of Jesus Christ, what remains for individuals is

... to welcome the divine verdict, to take it seriously with full responsibility, not to keep their knowledge of it to themselves, but by the witness of their existence and proclamation to make known to the world which is still blind and deaf to this verdict the alteration which has in fact taken place by it.<sup>70</sup>

If the answer to the ethical question is already given in Jesus Christ, then what remains for the individual is to witness before the world to the completion of God's work in Jesus Christ. This witness is far more than witnessing to knowledge of a fact, for, as Healy argues, "although Barth might agree that there is a sense in which we 'show' the truth in our witness, what we show is God justifying God's actions in Christ by sanctifying us in the Spirit."<sup>71</sup> Barth thus warns that the individual "loses his soul, and hazards his eternal salvation, if he will not accept the public responsibility which he assumes when he becomes a disciple of Jesus."<sup>72</sup> In this witness is found the telos of ethical action.

The ability to witness remains firmly in the power of God and must therefore be given to the ethical agent as a gift. Barth writes that

[T]o him, who has not deserved this, there is granted and ascribed, as he is summoned to this petition and the corresponding action, the trust and honor of personal responsibility for making perceptible this gospel of God through the dedication and

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<sup>67</sup> Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, 140 n.38.

<sup>68</sup> II/2, 611. George Hunsinger thus suggests that "[W]itness is thus the true context of fellowship with Christ in this life," *How to Read Karl Barth*, 138.

<sup>69</sup> II/1, 673.

<sup>70</sup> IV/1, 317.

<sup>71</sup> Healy, "Karl Barth's ecclesiology reconsidered," 293.

<sup>72</sup> IV/2, 545.

service of his life, of being instituted as a witness to it.<sup>73</sup>

This power to witness is both Christologically and pneumatologically grounded. First, as the ethical agent participates in witness, she does so for Barth “simply as *adminiculum inferius* of the testimony itself, and even as such only by its own inner power, in the inexpressible wonder of the grace of Jesus Christ.”<sup>74</sup> And second, Barth writes of the Christian that “[R]egarding the power of his witness, he is always thrown back on its verification by God himself, on the testimony of the Holy Spirit hastening to help him.”<sup>75</sup> Thus Barth writes that it is always God “who defines and ordains the testimony, when it is really the testimony of His own children, born again by the Word and Spirit.”<sup>76</sup>

Nevertheless, the claim of the command of God means that the call to witness demands a genuine human activity. Barth writes that “the task of witness to God’s gracious choice is a human task,”<sup>77</sup> and that “in his place and within his limits he with his action is the witness of Jesus Christ and therefore of God’s will and work.”<sup>78</sup> In fulfilling the task of witness, the ethical agent “shares in God’s work as far as it is possible for him to do so, as the creature of God, loved and elected by Him.”<sup>79</sup> In truth, the work of the ethical agent cannot for Barth “be more or other than a human indication and attestation of the Word of God, disrupted and burdened by the

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<sup>73</sup> *TCL*, 186.

<sup>74</sup> II/2, 339. In the original sense, Barth notes, it is only in Jesus Christ Himself that “it is given to human essence to attest the divine authority, to serve and execute it, to be its indispensable organ,” IV/2, 98. And therefore “[W]e have to rely on the fact that it is Jesus Christ who has given me a part in His business; that He has not done so in vain; that He will make use of my service, and in that way make it real service, even though I do not see how my service can be real service,” I/2, 453. It is only by the power of the Word that her choosing and willing take on a specific character so that her life becomes a text accessible both to other Christians and to non-Christians, *TCL*, 201.

<sup>75</sup> *TCL*, 181. Barth posits that it is unquestionably the meaning and scope of the work of the Holy Spirit to make Christians free, able, willing and ready for the ministry of witness, IV/4, 31.

<sup>76</sup> I/2, 414.

<sup>77</sup> II/2, 417. Barth therefore notes of the Christian that “even his most loyal concern and strenuous effort to maintain his existence as a witness of Jesus Christ is always a human work,” IV/3, 921, and thus Christians “are not the instruments and objects of an event which storms past them,” IV/4, 136.

<sup>78</sup> III/4, 482. Barth observes that this human witness takes place in the service of the divine work, and that as it is done in that service, “it is a good work,” IV/2, 592. There is in this task of service no ulterior goal, III/4, 77, for Barth notes that “I do not will anything and I may not will anything in rendering this witness. I simply live the life of my faith in the concrete encounter with the neighbour. The strength of the Christian witness stands or falls with the fact that with all its urgency this restraint is peculiar to it,” I/2, 441.

<sup>79</sup> II/2, 417.

sinfulness of his human existence.”<sup>80</sup> However, Barth insists that “the service of his human witness *is* demanded,”<sup>81</sup> and affirms that “it certainly is within his power - for all its total difference from the power of God - to be a faithful, joyful and earnest witness to the election and calling of these others.”<sup>82</sup> This power to witness is granted to the ethical agent in the event of prayer. Barth writes of the individual that

[W]hen he confesses in his human witness he will pray that there will not be denied him the divine counter-witness, without which, as he well knows, he can do nothing at all. But precisely by praying for it, he will work by bearing his human witness.<sup>83</sup>

It is at this point that Barth’s actualistic approach to witness becomes most evident. Barth declares that the ethical agent can be God’s witness only by becoming so ever anew, and that this is “just what happens in prayer.”<sup>84</sup> While the individual is to realise his true determination as a disciple and a witness and a Christian, this means that he has “to remain, and continually to become again, what he is.”<sup>85</sup>

For Barth, Christians “have to be witnesses, shining lights of hope, to all men.”<sup>86</sup> In this witness to others in the service of Jesus Christ, however, Barth warns that the individual stands under the shadow of the cross, and therefore “affliction comes upon him from without, from the world in face of which he stands.”<sup>87</sup> Consequently, for Barth, the ethical agent who is “called to be a witness, and therefore the Christian, is always the Christian in affliction.”<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, Barth argues that Christians only

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<sup>80</sup> IV/3, 609. Accordingly, for Barth, the individual “must accept the fact that the success of his witness is not in his own hands but in the hands of the One whom has to serve in it,” IV/3, 657. Nevertheless, it is for Barth *inevitable* that the liberation of the ethical agent will be perceived in her witness, IV/3, 676.

<sup>81</sup> IV/3, 609, emphasis added.

<sup>82</sup> II/2, 416. Barth outlines the content of Christian witness to the neighbour in three ways: as the word of witness, I/2, 441, and the giving of assistance, I/2, 444, with an evangelical attitude, I/2, 447. However, such witness has, for Barth, “continually to take place, to become an event,” IV/2, 812.

<sup>83</sup> II/1, 96-97.

<sup>84</sup> III/4, 87.

<sup>85</sup> IV/3, 646.

<sup>86</sup> *TCL*, 270. McDowell writes that the concept of witness “is potentially, and unfortunately, disregarded in IV.4 and CL wherein the concept of ‘correspondence’, rather than ‘witness’, assumes centre-stage,” *Hope in Barth’s Eschatology*, 233. However, this is not only to disregard such passages as the long discussion of what it means to be a witness, on *TCL*, 201, but also to suggest a dichotomy between the two concepts where none exists. Rather, as Mangina suggests, it is precisely the language of ‘correspondence’ (along with that of the *analogia fidei*) which “affirms God’s enlistment of creaturely realities as witnesses to Jesus Christ,” *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 87 n.17.

<sup>87</sup> IV/3, 615.

<sup>88</sup> IV/3, 640. George Hunsinger correspondingly writes that “[T]he special vocation of the Christian is to share in the living self-witness of the Crucified. This sharing results in a fellowship of action and a fellowship of suffering,” *How to Read Karl Barth*, 183. Barth notes, however, that such affliction is a

praise God as they “conform to Him and attest Him as God,”<sup>89</sup> and that in their praise of God, they do indeed love and bear witness to their neighbour.<sup>90</sup> The affliction which the individual suffers cannot, then, alter his ultimate determination, for he remains “a man who is absolutely secured by the goal appointed for him in Christ.”<sup>91</sup>

*ii) the witness of the Church*

The actualistic concept of witness outlined above in the case of the individual is not only appropriately, but perhaps also primarily, relevant and valid in the sphere of the Church. Barth writes that “[T]he community is the people of Christians who even as individuals are decisively and essentially witnesses,”<sup>92</sup> for the Church is “the witness of the love with which God has loved the world.”<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Barth posits that the true invisible being of the community of Jesus Christ is that “it is given to it to be appointed His witness.”<sup>94</sup> While Barth is clear that there can never be any question of anything more or anything other than the ministry of witness for the Church,<sup>95</sup> he also insists that the Church must fulfil this ministry and enter on the way of those called to be witnesses of Jesus Christ.<sup>96</sup>

For Barth, the witness of the Church has both a vertical and a horizontal aspect. He writes that it is “both a ministry to God and a ministry to man: a ministry to God in which it may serve man; and a ministry to man in which it may serve God.”<sup>97</sup> And therefore the vertical action of obeying the command of God also has an explicit horizontal goal in creation. Barth asserts in respect of the Gospel that “the world must see and hear at least an indication, or sign, of what has taken place.”<sup>98</sup> To this

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secondary and necessary but not a primary determination of Christian existence, IV/3, 616.

<sup>89</sup> II/1, 674.

<sup>90</sup> I/2, 440.

<sup>91</sup> IV/3, 645.

<sup>92</sup> IV/3, 834-835.

<sup>93</sup> IV/2, 511.

<sup>94</sup> IV/3, 729.

<sup>95</sup> III/3, 278-279.

<sup>96</sup> IV/4, 68. As Krötke notes, then, it is within the community of faith that “it is the task of the Christian to be a *witness* of the reconciling God and the reconciled human in the world,” in “Gott und Mensch als ‘Partner’,” 169.

<sup>97</sup> IV/3, 831.

<sup>98</sup> IV/2, 544. Barth continues that “[T]he break made by God in Jesus must become history. That is why Jesus calls his disciples,” IV/2, 544. Barth also notes that “[T]he world needs this witness, and its

end, he argues that “[T]he ministry and therefore the witness of the community is essentially and in all forms and circumstances ... the declaration of the Gospel.”<sup>99</sup> Barth states that it is the will of God that through the existence of the Church and its people, the Gospel of God should be declared to and accepted by its hearers.<sup>100</sup> And therefore, he observes, “Christians are ordained, engaged, empowered, and separated to declare this witness.”<sup>101</sup> It is through this witness of the community that true fellowship is established between individuals.<sup>102</sup>

The witness of the Church is construed actualistically, as both a divine act and a human act. On the one hand, witness is an event enabled by the grace of God for which the Church must pray, for Barth writes that

... as the service of God, it is to be noted that it can be discharged as such (in the service of man) only as it continually becomes this, i.e., only as the community does not cease to pray, and so does not cease to be granted, that its ministry ... may continually acquire the character of service of God.<sup>103</sup>

This character of the witness of the community cannot therefore be taken for granted as a given factor, but rather remains “the gift of free grace.”<sup>104</sup> Barth notes simply that “[I]f God wills to use it to accomplish His own work through its labour, this is His affair.”<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, however, Barth writes that this witness is neither divine nor semi-divine but “the unequivocally human speech and action of a people like all others.”<sup>106</sup> He asserts that the Church simply has to do what it has been commissioned and commanded to do,<sup>107</sup> and its particular *opus proprium* is “its

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content has to do with the world’s salvation,” *TCL*, 97.

<sup>99</sup> IV/3, 844.

<sup>100</sup> IV/2, 334.

<sup>101</sup> *TCL*, 97. Barth writes that Christians are called to be witnesses of the “comprehensive and radical alteration of the human and cosmic situation,” III/4, 487. And Barth notes that to the extent that it seeks to recount the history of Jesus Christ as such, “it is a witness, performing its ministry and justifying its existence before God and man,” IV/3, 850.

<sup>102</sup> IV/3, 898.

<sup>103</sup> IV/3, 832.

<sup>104</sup> IV/3, 832.

<sup>105</sup> III/3, 488. For Barth, then, it can only be the work of the Holy Spirit on the community “that in its action or refraining from action there is more or less genuine and clear reflection, illustration and attestation of His action, more or less faithful discipleship in the life of this people, and therefore a fulfilment of its commission,” IV/3, 761. It therefore has no right to ask for successes in this ministry, III/3, 488, but must leave the results of its witness to Jesus Christ, IV/3, 829, for it is always utterly reliant upon the personal promise of God that is given and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, IV/3, 843.

<sup>106</sup> IV/3, 839.

<sup>107</sup> IV/3, 750.



commission to preach the Gospel to the world.”<sup>108</sup>

Ultimately, however, there is no disjunction of the divine activity and the human activity at this point, as Barth notes of the community that “what it can do and effect and accomplish of itself in its human and creaturely spontaneity, as empowered by the power of the Holy Spirit, can consist only in its confession of Jesus Christ.”<sup>109</sup> This marks for Barth the superfluity of the divine grace, that “God does not will to be God without man in his limitation rendering Him the service of his witness.”<sup>110</sup> As this event takes place in the service of witness of the Church, it becomes true that Jesus Christ “is also secondarily, or in reflection, illustrated and attested by the movements and in the being and activity of His community.”<sup>111</sup>

### **C - conformity as glorification**

As the ethical agent participates in the being and action of God and therewith witnesses to the being and action of God, there take place two distinct but inseparable events: the glorification of God by the creature and the glorification of the creature by God. First, Barth writes that “[W]hat the creature does in its new creatureliness ... is to glorify God.”<sup>112</sup> It is a creaturely *glorificatio*, and it is not without its inner problems, but it is nonetheless a genuine *glorificatio*.<sup>113</sup> And second, Barth posits that the ethical agent receives “a part in the divine *gloria*, and the divine *gloria* is not ashamed to dwell in it and to shine through it.”<sup>114</sup> He writes that “in all its otherness, as His creature and antithesis, this being has been ordained to participation in His own glory, the glory to which it owes its origin.”<sup>115</sup> Barth concludes that “δοξάζεσθαι means both the glorification of God by the creature and

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<sup>108</sup> III/4, 506.

<sup>109</sup> IV/3, 787.

<sup>110</sup> III/4, 657.

<sup>111</sup> IV/3, 757. Barth reassures the Church that the promise of Jesus Christ “does not stand like a closed and brazen heaven above it, but can always demonstrate and confirm itself in specific fulfillments,” IV/3, 840.

<sup>112</sup> II/1, 669.

<sup>113</sup> II/1, 669.

<sup>114</sup> II/1, 669.

<sup>115</sup> II/2, 169. Barth observes that creation “has no glory of its own ... [but] can only participate in His glory and glorify Him,” III/3, 53.



of the creature by God.”<sup>116</sup> This twofold glorification fulfils the one will of God: “His own glory as Creator, and in it the justification, deliverance, salvation, and ultimately the glorification of the creature as it realises its particular existence.”<sup>117</sup>

#### **D - summary**

For Barth, as the action of the ethical agent participates in and witnesses to the divine action, it truly glorifies God. Barth notes that this action, in all its creatureliness and sinfulness, can only ever be a *parergon* next to the one true *ergon* of God.<sup>118</sup> Yet, Barth states unequivocally that despite this, God

... wills to give us a share in His work in our independence as the creatures of God summoned to freedom, as those who are justified and sanctified in Him. And so He wills to give us time and space for this participation in His work.<sup>119</sup>

It is always for Barth “the miracle of miracles ... that God wills to use and claim him in this sense.”<sup>120</sup> Yet in this miracle, the ethical agent is elected by God and given time and space in her history to respond to the command of God which encounters her. And in this miracle, she is empowered to determine herself in correspondence with her determination in Jesus Christ as a creature of freedom in action: witnessing to, participating in, and glorifying the divine work. As this miracle happens, the ethical agent finds her earthly telos, playing - in all her limitation - a genuine, significant, and effective part in salvation history.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> II/1, 670. Webster consequently observes that “the *telos* of the work of God in Christ is not simply God’s self-glorification, but his self-glorification in the glorification of humanity,” *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 88-89.

<sup>117</sup> III/3, 168.

<sup>118</sup> III/4, 523.

<sup>119</sup> IV/3, 332.

<sup>120</sup> III/4, 483. Barth posits that “in so far as the creature is the object of the divine activity and the recipient of the grace of God, it becomes *ipso facto*, not the means of this grace, for grace works directly or not at all, but its witness and herald and proclaimer. Thus even in the utter humility of its spiritual existence it acquires an active function within the history of the covenant,” III/3, 64. Rosato is thus simply wrong to suggest that in Barth, “autonomous human actions lose their right to play even a subordinate part in divine-human interaction,” *The Spirit as Lord*, 139.

<sup>121</sup> IV/3, 599.



## §9 Conclusion

*... man as a Hercules at the crossroads ... is a pure illusion. - Barth<sup>1</sup>*

Through a close reading of the *Church Dogmatics*, this thesis has demonstrated that one of the key structural features of its theological ethics is its actualism. The analysis in the preceding chapters has demonstrated that, for Karl Barth, the noetic, ontic, and telic dimensions of ethical agency cannot be adequately understood without an adequate appreciation of this actualistic ontology which grounds their foundations. The thesis has outlined the way in which, in the *Church Dogmatics*, this actualistic ontology affects the theory and practice of theological ethics; how it underpins the construal of human being, human freedom, and human agency; and how it influences the conception of human conformity to the divine command in terms of ethical action. At each step, an appropriate appreciation of this actualistic aspect of Barth's construal of theological ethics has deflected or at least attenuated criticism of his work in the field.

In this short concluding chapter, there is left only to offer brief comment as to the relevance of this actualistic construal of ethical agency for contemporary moral theology. This will be assessed first, in terms of the orientation of theological ethics to God, and second, in terms of the orientation of theological ethics to the world.

### **A - an orientation of theological ethics to God**

The first great strength which Barth's actualistic ontology brings to contemporary moral theology in the Church is its awareness of the living God and God's relationship with God's creatures. Biggar thus observes that Barth's ethics is perhaps

... unique in the ethical seriousness with which it takes both God as one who is actively engaged in personal relationship with his human creatures, and the human moral agent as one whose basic identity is given in that relationship.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> IV/1, 746.

<sup>2</sup> Biggar, *Hastening*, 166.

Throughout his theological ethics, Barth focuses on this living relationship of the ethical agent with God, a relationship that is enabled by Jesus Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit. While Scripture remains the irreplaceable witness to and the Church the irreplaceable context of this reality, Barth refuses to abstract from the genuine particularity of this relational encounter, and correspondingly refuses to cede authority in theological ethics either to the proof-texts of Scripture or to the historical pronouncements of the Church. And while the ethical agent is both capable and guilty of the most horrendous acts of sin, nevertheless Barth refuses to abstract the ethical agent from her position in the covenant of grace that is grounded in the eternal Self-determination of God and revealed in Jesus Christ.

For some theological commentators, this actualistic ontology leads Barth to underestimate the importance of Scripture, the role of the Church, and the sin of the individual. However, the danger is that such charges fail to appreciate the importance for Barth of the activity of God at each point: inspiring and empowering the reader of Scripture; gathering, upbuilding, and sending the Christian community; and overcoming the power of sin in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The activity of God is the source of tremendous confidence and hope for the Church, not in *ignorance* of but in *spite* of the highly visible and seemingly inescapable sinfulness of human nature. It should also be the impetus for corresponding ethical action, for Barth writes that “[A]s the one Word of God which is the revelation and work of His grace reaches us, its aim is that our being and action should be conformed to His.”<sup>3</sup> In this paradigm of orientation to God, Barth radically distances himself from any idea of the ethical agent as autarchically self-determining and of theological ethics as a value-neutral, rationalistic enterprise. Instead, Barth sees the Church and the ethical agent as being called and empowered by God to make use of their true freedom in acts of self-determination which both correspond to the activity and obey the command of God.

At the same time, however, within the actualistic ontology which Barth outlines, the Church - with all its hope and confidence - can little afford to be either complacent or

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<sup>3</sup> II/2, 512.

arrogant in its ethical declarations and its ethical practices. The living God which calls the Church into being is a God who surprises, a God who commands into the moment, and who may command in a very different way tomorrow than today. Knowledge of God and of the will of God thus remains a matter for the God who is revealed in a dialectic of veiling and unveiling. And this means that as Barth's actualistic ontology construes the command of God as a living command, the discipline of theological ethics remains fundamentally open to theonomous change and development. While the ongoing history of the covenant will offer the ethical agent guidance in the sphere of knowledge of the command of God, then, genuine apprehension continues to be utterly dependent on the grace of the divine revelation. The actualistic ontology of the *Church Dogmatics* thus leads in theological ethics to a profound decentring of the ethical agent from herself and to a recentring of her ethical activity and ethical reflection on Jesus Christ, to whose salvific action she is called to witness. Hence in contrast with many contemporary moral theologians, as Webster notes, Barth's theological ethics is best interpreted "as a reflection upon a transcendent order of *being* and *value* organised around the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup>

While this actualistic framework and the reorientation to God which it emphasises possess many theological virtues, they cannot be said to eradicate all of the problems of contemporary theological ethics. Such a framework in itself offers no assurance that the Church will achieve either intra- or inter-denominational agreement on ethical issues, let alone agreement on what practical action might follow any consensus. Indeed, by reconstruing Scripture in actualistic terms, it might be argued that Barth is actually undermining one of the key sources of argumentation in theological ethics - proof-texting. Moreover, precisely Barth's insistence on the particularity and specificity of the command of God might be criticised for engendering in hypothetical practice an increase, rather than a decrease, of confusion and diversity in current ethical thinking in the Church.

In the chapters above, this thesis has sought to allay some of these concerns in

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<sup>4</sup> Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 219.

respect of Barth's actualistic ontology by reflecting upon the 'formed' reference to each ethical event and the unity and continuity of the covenant of grace. However, perhaps the most profound response to such concerns is to suggest that as his actualistic ontology points the Church and the ethical agent back to God at every step, it does so in full awareness of the creatureliness and sinfulness which inevitably mar human ethical discussion and practice. It is only in Jesus Christ that the unity of the Church lies. And it is only as the ethical agent and the Church come before God to seek the will of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit that they fulfil their true calling, that they become truly human, and that the possibility of true unity finally has time and space.

### **B - an orientation of theological ethics to the world**

The second great strength which Barth's actualistic ontology brings to contemporary moral theology is its awareness of the being of humanity as co-humanity. The Church never stands over and above or against the world, but only *for* the world by virtue of its commissioning by Jesus Christ and *with* the world by virtue of its own humanity. Given that the Church and the ethical are called to remain oriented primarily towards God, this leaves the Church with a balance to strike. Lovin correspondingly cautions that while the Church for Barth must preserve its freedom from the surrounding culture, "[T]his need not imply a withdrawing strategy that refuses to take any active role in the life of society."<sup>5</sup> Rather, the call to witness and service demands that the Church and its members play a part in the affairs of the world, not only through activities such as praise, evangelisation and mission, but also through activities such as the cure of souls, prophecy, and *diakonia*.<sup>6</sup> The actualistic ontology with which Barth operates thus draws attention not only to the action of the ethical agent in respect of God, but also to her action in respect of her neighbour.

The question of how the Church and the ethical agent fulfil their roles in the wider world - in relation to the State, to other public organisations, and to other religious communities - is not one to which Barth devotes significant attention in the *Church*

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<sup>5</sup> Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 166.

<sup>6</sup> IV/3, 865, 872, and 874; and IV/3, 885, 895, and 889 respectively.



*Dogmatics*. Certainly, Barth may have hoped to give the issue of Church and State further attention in the incomplete parts of IV/4. Yet the tendency, under an actualistic ontology, for his theological ethics to abstain from more precise delineations of ecclesial or individual behaviour suggests that only broad guidance might have been expected from such material. Rather, it seems that Barth would see the question of working out a mode of engagement for the Church in the world to be a task which the Church has to reflect upon in attentiveness to the Word of God on an ongoing basis.

In that sense, at least, the actualistic ontology which underpins Barth's ethics leaves the contemporary Church with much to consider and much to do. First, there is the question of the relationship between the Church and the State, and specifically of what kind of contribution the Church has to make to a *polis* in respect of which the Church seems increasingly marginal. Second, there is the issue of the relationship between the Church and other public organisations, especially on occasions where, despite different foundations and motivations, both sides share a common purpose - whether in political involvement, social criticism, or ethical action. And third, there is the matter of the relationship between the Church and other religious communities, which is becoming ever more of an issue not only at the level of local communities, but also in geo-political terms. In each case, there is a continuing challenge to the Church to maintain its distinctive orientation and identity while not allowing that distinctiveness to impede its witness or its service.

At the same time, the actualistic ontology with which Barth grounds his theological ethics also offers an important indication of the attitude with which the Church and the ethical agent are to approach these relationships. First, Barth demands on the grounds of the actualism of their vocation that Christians "are constrained to be absolutely open in respect of all other men without exception."<sup>7</sup> And second, Barth asserts that as Jesus Christ is the living Lord of all, the Church is to recognise that "[I]n all ages, the will of God has been fulfilled outside the Church as well."<sup>8</sup> Without ever losing the primary orientation to the Word of God in Jesus Christ, then,

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<sup>7</sup> IV/3, 493.

<sup>8</sup> II/2, 569.

the need for a continuing creaturely *habitus* of humility and openness in face of the other applies not only *intra* but also *extra muros ecclesiae*. There is held open by Barth's actualistic ontology the possibility that theological ethics can learn in and from the world what the command of God is, and the consequent demand that the Church be ready to listen to and learn from the other. It is as this particular witness to the other takes place, that there is attested anew the love of Jesus Christ for all in the fact that from the very start, the ethical agent is a true 'humanist'.<sup>9</sup>

### **C - summary**

The theological ethics of Karl Barth holds together in its actualistic ontology the two key dimensions of ethical agency - the vertical dimension of the orientation of the ethical agent to God and the horizontal dimension of the orientation of the ethical agent to her neighbour in the world. By bringing both of these dimensions into clear focus, Barth posits a vision of ethical agency in which the ethical agent and the Church are called forth from their pride, sloth, and falsehood into a dynamic and active relationship with God. Striving by grace to correspond to their election in faith, obedience, and prayer, so they may not only participate in and witness to the work of Jesus Christ, but in doing so, glorify the God who has given them life.

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<sup>9</sup> *TCL*, 267.

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